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Mobilising Assamese Vaishnavite performance practices

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MOBILISING ASSAMESE VAISHNAVITE
PERFORMANCE PRACTICES:
CULTURAL VALUE ON THE MOVE

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Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

In the Arts and Humanities Department

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December 2019

Abstract

This thesis considers processes of mobilising a dance form in new social arenas, across international borders and between different bodies. What is the value of taking dance into new contexts, and what new systems of values are anticipated and encountered on route? How does such mobilisation effect what is danced? These questions are explored in relation to a community of monks from Assam, northeast India, who have a long tradition of performing in ritual and public contexts and who have recently started to mobilise their art form on the national and international stage. In 2000 the Indian government recognised part of the monastic repertoire as an ‘Indian Classical Dance’ called ‘Sattriya’, and the concomitant interest in the dance form from Indian middle class and foreign students has led to new pathways and opportunities for the bhakats of Assam.

The study draws from the author’s ethnographic fieldwork and professional engagement in Uttar Kamalabari Sattri between 2012 and 2018 as well as historical material and recent scholarship on ‘Sattriya’ dance. Focusing on the work of monastic choreographers Bhabananda Barbayen and Govinda Kalita, it includes close ‘textual’ and ‘contextual’ analysis of dances produced for the ‘national’ and ‘international’ stage. I relate these choices to the value systems of both the dance producers and the gatekeepers of mobility—the funders, national bodies and institutions which enable the dance to move. In doing so, it contributes to scholarly understanding of the institutional and discursive landscape which Indian artists navigate, and the ways which creative agents interact with, manipulate and operate beyond national institutions and representation which frame their work.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Table of Contents	2
Table of Figures	5
List of Maps	6
Acknowledgements	7
A note on terms and transliteration	8
Introduction: The value of mobilisation	10
Central Research Question	10
Scope of the study	11
Justification for this study	12
i. An Ethnography of Classicisation from the perspective of the original practitioners	12
ii. Ethnography of a ‘South-North’ Tour	14
Mobilising Dance: Frameworks for analysis	17
Graeber’s Theory of Value	18
i. Building Social Relations	20
ii. Gaining ‘fame’	22
iii. Creating value through action	23
iv. Being recognised	24
Chapter Outline	25
Chapter One: Methodology and literature review	29
Ethnographic Field Methods	31
i. ‘Mobile ethnography’	31
ii. Producing knowledge of the ‘other’	33
iii. Compromised fieldwork?	36
iv. Embodied ethnography and gaining kinaesthetic knowledge	41
v. Woman; mother; wife – gender in the field	46
Dance on the Move: Literature Review	52
i. Performing Arts and the Nation	53
a) Performing Arts and the Indian Nation	54
b) The Notion of ‘Revival’	57
ii. ‘Worlding Dance’	59
a) Globalising Indian Dance	60
b) Globalising Dance	65
Conclusion	69
Chapter Two: Vaishnavism and the <i>sattr</i> institution of Assam	71
Assamese Vaishnavism	71
The Nika Sanghati and The Kamalabari Effect	79

Uttar Kamalabari Sattra: physical description and functioning	83
Conclusion	90
Chapter Three: Mobilising <i>sattriya</i> arts nationally	92
Mobilising the <i>cali nach</i>	95
i. 'Namghar version'	97
ii. 'Auditorium version'	98
iii. Summary of differences	100
iv. Analysis of differences: making sattra arts into 'Indian classical Dance'	102
Representations of Sattriya and National Values	106
i. 'Die-hard traditionalists'	108
ii. Origins in 15th-century bhaona with no outside influence before or since	109
iii. Sattra arts are 'shastric'	110
iv. Effacement of change between sattriya arts and 'Sattriya Dance'	111
Beyond nationalist narratives	113
i. A recent development	113
ii. A deep involvement by <i>bhakats</i> in the classicisation process	114
iii. An outward-reaching spectacle	121
iv. Multiple origins	123
Conclusion	128
Chapter Four: Mobilising <i>sattriya</i> arts internationally - Contexts	130
The ICCR and institutional discrimination	135
Arts Council England Funding and 'widening participation'	139
British Museum and the 'Vrindavani Vastra'	141
i. Incongruent narratives	142
ii. The Value of the 'Vrindavani Vastra'	148
iii. 'Vrindavani Vastra' and the UK tour	151
Conclusion	153
Chapter Five: Mobilising <i>sattriya</i> arts internationally - Texts	155
Staging	158
Entry Rituals and Props	164
Instruments	168
Artists	170
Performance Item 1: Mati Akhara	172
Performance Item 2: The 'Vandana'	175
Performance Item 3: The Vrindavani Paal	178
i. Ojā Pāli style	178
ii. Dramatic Episodes	180
Performance Item 5: Gayan Bayan	184
Choreographing value for Western audiences and Indian Funders	186
Chapter Six: Mobilising <i>sattriya</i> arts via 'foreign bodies'	189
Local value; foreign bodies	189

The value of ‘The West’	190
Embodied Tourism	192
Sattriya Dance and non-Vaishnavites	194
Case Study 1: In the sattrā	195
Case Study 2: Sattriya workshops in the UK	202
Case Study 3: International Bhaona performances	207
Mouldable bodies; establishing boundaries	209
Conclusion	213
Conclusion	215
Limitations of this thesis	216
Principle observations	219
i. ‘Continuity of intention’	219
ii. Performing arts for a middle-class nation	221
iii. Creating value beyond the nation state	224
Implications of this research	225
Bibliography	231
Web/ Internet Resources	252
Filmography	253
Appendix I: Anatomy of a toured dance	254

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Gateway to UKS.....	84
Figure 2: Auditorium at Uttar Kamalabari Sattra.....	85
Figure 3: Bhaona performance, Golaghat, May 2014	158
Figure 4: Bhaona performance showing location of musicians	159
Figure 5: Diagram of Namghar layout.....	160
Figure 6: Performance in the Great Hall of the British Museum	161
Figure 7: Diagram showing performance layout.....	161
Figure 8: Agni-garh	165
Figure 9: Agni-garh 2	165
Figure 10: Miniature 'agni-garh'	167
Figure 11: Demonstration of Koshok position.....	173
Figure 12: Bhabananda as Krishna; Mukunda the devotee.....	177
Figure 13: Krishna vanquishing the crane-demon Bakasura	181
Figure 14: Krishna dancing on the hood of the many-headed snake demon Kaliya	182
Figure 15: DY365 news coverage of my dance lessons at UKS.....	201
Figure 16: Interview with Govinda Kalita about my dance lessons.....	201
Figure 17: Bhabananda Barbayan conducting a workshop.....	205
Figure 18: Sign announcing 'The dancing monks of Majuli Island'	259
Figure 19: Entrance of the artists	265
Figure 20: 'Lighting the lamps' on the agnighar.....	267
Figure 21: orat baha-utha movement.....	268
Figure 22: purush ora position	269
Figure 23: gerowa sowa position.....	269
Figure 24: hordenko hand position.....	270
Figure 25: har bhanga spine twist with lifted leg	270
Figure 26: morai pani khowa position.....	271
Figure 27: kachoy pani khowa position.....	271
Figure 28: The Musicians	272
Figure 29: Vandana:	276
Figure 30: purush and prakriti ora stances.....	277
Figure 31: Position during Phrase 2, Melody 2.....	278
Figure 32: Embodying Krishna's strength.....	279
Figure 33: Krishna's lotus eyes.....	280
Figure 34: Tracing an arc	282
Figure 35: Devotional tableau	283
Figure 36: Krishna's Lotus eyes (second interpretation).....	284
Figure 37: Symmetrical position	285
Figure 38: Symmetrical movement	285
Figure 39: Bhabananda in 'Krishna' pose.....	286
Figure 40: The crescent moon (first time)	287
Figure 41: Full moon (second time)	287
Figure 42: Tableau representing Vishnu.....	291
Figure 43: Krishna lifts mount Govardhan on one finger.....	292
Figure 44: Kurma the tortoise incarnation of Vishnu.....	292
Figure 45: Varaha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu	292
Figure 46: Krishna kills his cousin Sisupala.....	294
Figure 47: Controller of the four yugas	296
Figure 48: Krishna (left) sporting with a Gopi (right).....	299
Figure 49: Krishna, creator of the serpents.....	302

Figure 50: Bird's beak.....	302
Figure 51: Bird's wings.....	303
Figure 52: Bird in flight.....	303
Figure 53: Krishna and loving devotee (19:04)	304
Figure 54: End of pāli's opening sequence	308
Figure 55: The oja (Niranjan) depicts an elephant.....	310
Figure 56: 'First do I bow unto Thee, O Sanatana Narayana'	312
Figure 57: Position taken each time oja utters 'avatara'	313
Figure 58: 'Thou hadst incarnated first as Fish'.....	313
Figure 59: 'Thou hadst incarnated as Tortoise'.....	314
Figure 60: 'As divine Yajña-Varāha thou hadst appeareth'	316
Figure 61: Hiranakaśipu.....	317
Figure 62: Thou didst cut to pieces Ksatriyas with Thy axe in hand	318
Figure 63: 'Thou hadst incarnated as Narasimha'	319
Figure 64: Krishna kills Bakasura	321
Figure 65: The oja introduces the serpent demon Kaliya	322
Figure 66: Lyrics from a song in Kaliya Daman.....	323
Figure 67: Jadumani and Dinnanath as Kaliya the snake demon.....	323
Figure 68: Krishna stands on the hood of the serpent demon Kaliya.....	325
Figure 69: Gayan Bayan	329
Figure 70: Namaskar position during gayan bayan.....	330
Figure 71: Position at 01:01:08 during gayan bayan.....	330

List of Maps

Map 1: Map of India showing location of Assam	72
Map 2: Map of Assam showing location of Majuli Island	72

Acknowledgements

I am sincerely grateful to the many supporters, friends and well-wishers who have allowed me the space and time to read, write and think so deeply about these beautiful Assamese performance traditions. This thesis was made possible by generous grants from the London Arts and Humanities Partnership and from the Butterfield Trust. The UK tour discussed in Chapters Four, Five and Six was enabled through financial support from the Arts Council England, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, London Arts and Humanities Partnership, King's College Cultural Institute, the enthusiasm of Richard Blurton from the British Museum, and the goodwill of many of my friends and family.

Dr Katherine Schofield, my thanks to you for being the best sort of supervisor a doctoral student could hope for: insightful, kind and intellectually generous. I am grateful also to Professor Ananya Kabir for starting me off on this great Indian adventure fifteen years ago and for your continued enthusiasm for my work. My thanks also to my two examiners Ann David and Simon McKerrell for their careful reading and thoughtful suggestions which have led to a far more coherent thesis. To Faith, my thanks for your inspiring, tireless work and providing me with such a beautiful place to write and for Robi-Jo to play and learn at a crucial time. To John Singh, who I miss hugely, for your encouragement of my work and big-hearted contribution the world of Indian music.

A thousand thanks also to all the people who have given Robi-Jo such a magical time while I have been writing, in particular Sally, Mithudi, Reepandee, Themboy, Sophie, Pritham, Rachel, Thea, Rohini, Ava and many others who there is no space to mention here.

I would like to thank all my friends at Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā, in particular Govinda Kalita, Bhabananda Barbayan, Jadumani Saikia and Niranjana Saikia, for sharing their talent, knowledge and good humour with me throughout the research and on tour. Also, to the musicians, dancers and performance experts of Assam, Rajasthan and West Bengal who brought me to India and keep drawing me back.

I also want to express my appreciation for the help, love and encouragement that has come from my family. To my parents Briony and Mike Pope for your unconditional support on all fronts, from day one to the very end. To my son Robi-Jo for enriching my fieldwork and the joyful moments in between writing a thesis *almost* as old as you. And to Som who has been by my side throughout absolutely everything: thank you for sharing your love of Indian music, for helping me to think and to listen and for caring about this work as much as I do.

A note on terms and transliteration

Sattras and bhakats: monasteries and monks

English-language accounts of Assamese Vaishnavism¹ tend to refer to its religious institutions as ‘monasteries’ and their residents as ‘monks’². These are not perfect translations, as many practices of these Vaishnava institutions differ from those of European, largely Catholic, traditions from which ‘monastery’ and ‘monk’ derive. For example, the majority of *sattras* in Assam are not celibate, like their Christian counterparts, but *grihastya* (‘householder’) *sattras* like Gaurimur and Chamaguri, also on Majuli Island, which are populated with men, women and their children.³ In this sense, however, ‘monastery’ is a reasonable cognate for Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā, the institution at the heart of this thesis, as its resident devotees are unmarried. On the other hand, whilst some *sattras* derive income solely from royal land grants, in the pattern of Franciscan monasteries, the inhabitants of UKS are permitted to earn income from small business enterprises and, increasingly, teaching in various subjects. In this thesis, I prefer to use the Assamese word ‘*sattrā*’, as employed by the inhabitants of UKS, and in Assamese newspapers and histories as the term, unlike *ashram* or *math*, refers specifically to Assamese institutions. For similar reasons, instead of ‘monk’ I prefer ‘*bhakat*’ which is how the inmates of UKS refer to themselves in their communications with me. The word comes with its own complications, as in Assam a *bhakat* means simply ‘devotee’ and might refer more broadly to all those who adore Krishna—whether within or beyond a *sattrā*—but it is usually discernible from context which meaning is intended. In this thesis, I use the word *bhakat* only to refer to the long-term inmates of UKS and other *sattras*, unless specified otherwise.

Sattriya/ sattriya

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the varied performance practices of the Assamese *sattras* as ‘*sattriya* arts’. Simply ‘*sattriya*’ on its own is an adjective that may refer to anything ‘from or of the *sattrā*’.⁴ Using ‘arts’ as the qualifier, rather than ‘dance’,

¹ The strand of Hinduism which reveres Lord Vishnu above all other gods.

² *Monastres* and *moines* are used in French sources (for example, *moinesdemajuli.com*; Delpech 2006; and in the narration of the film *Dans les Brumes de Majuli*, Petite 2008)

³ Gaurimur only became a *grihastya* institution when its revolutionary Sattradikhar (religious principal) made the controversial change in 13th March, 1915. His reasons for making this change are described in D Nath 2012 and the film *Yugadrashta: The Visionary* (B J Mahanta 2013).

⁴ For example, ‘The head of a *sattrā* is popularly known as *adhikāra* or *sattriyā*’ (S N Sarma 1966: 102) and ‘In the royal court a special officer was appointed to look after the workings and management of

acknowledges that the performance practices addressed in this thesis also include drama, music, gymnastics and mask-making. Though I have aligned myself with most English-language scholarship on the subject by transcribing the Assamese word সত্ৰীয়া as *sattriya*, it does not describe Assamese pronunciation. In Assamese, স, though most frequently transliterated as ‘s’ is pronounced closer to ‘h’ or even ‘ch’ as in the Scottish ‘loch’ (a sound which can be transcribed as ‘x’). Furthermore, the inherent vowel sound, as well as the vowel আ, are, as in Bengali, pronounced like the English ‘o’ as in ‘hot’. Therefore, *hotriyo* or *xotriyo* would make closer literal phonetic transcriptions of how these words are pronounced by Assamese speakers and indicate how the reader should ‘sound’ the word *sattriya* as they read it.

For the proscenium performance style which has evolved from *sattriya* arts, I will use ‘Sattriya’, whose spelling and capitalised, non-italicised form are officially recognised by the two principal Indian state cultural agencies: the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA).⁵

Krishna/ Kṛṣṇa

Krishna is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu—one of the three major gods of Hindu traditions (the other two being Shiva and Brahma). Here I use ‘Krishna’, the most recognisable English spelling of कृष्ण (Hindi) or কৃষ্ণ (Assamese), rather than following Neog who transliterates the name as Kṛṣṇa. In all quotations, I have kept the original spelling or transliteration used by the author.

Satras. This officer was known as Satriya Baruah whose duty was to recommend steps to be taken by the Satras’ (D Nath 2012). Both Anwesa Mahanta and Ghanakanta Bora also acknowledge the multivalence of the term in interviews quoted in S Goswami 2015: Appendix 1.

⁵ This spelling and format is used in the list of ICCR-empanelled artists:

<http://www.iccr.gov.in/content/list-empanelled-artists> and in the list of SNA awardees:

<http://sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/Awardees.php>

Introduction: The Value of Mobilisation

Central Research Question

This thesis is concerned with the question of ‘cultural mobility’, by which I mean expressive arts finding new contexts. It considers the acts of creative transformation which allow a localised dance form to become recognised as a ‘national’ dance, to be toured abroad, and to be learnt by foreign students. What can a dance form ‘on the move’—one which encounters new contexts and terrains; changes hands or crosses borders—tell us about the world? What can it tell us about the values of its producers? I argue that a study of a dance form crossing social and geographical borders can provide important insights into the shape of the institutional and discursive terrain it encounters. It can also help us to understand artistic agency: what performers do when they want to reach broader audiences. My interest in these questions comes from more than six years of field work and professional collaboration with a community of Vaishnavite *bhakats* from Assam in northeast India who perform and teach dance in multiple contexts: in the *namghar* (the monastery prayer hall), on proscenium stages in urban settings and on foreign tours. During this time, I have observed the *bhakats* of my study strategically re-work their performance practices in order to address the different values of various audiences and cultural gatekeepers. In most accounts about *sattrā* performance practices, these changes are not acknowledged, either due to insufficient knowledge about the dance forms themselves by scholars of Assamese Vaishnavite culture, or because of a desire to project a sense of purity and continuity about the dance practices. By looking both at the ‘contexts’ of mobilisation (the cultural gatekeepers, funders, venues and spaces) and the ‘texts’ of mobilised dance practices (what is danced within the *sattrā*, on the proscenium stage and on a foreign tour), this thesis provides a detailed ethnographic case study demonstrating the relationship between movement and creativity.

In many studies that examine these questions of what I am calling ‘mobility’ of a performance form—processes of re-staging and commoditisation of culture—it is the values of the audiences and stakeholders in the new context that are emphasised, more than the considerations of the artistic producer. Artists are often seen simply to conform to new values, without any particular attention paid to the creative actions they take to re-shape material to do so or, indeed, their own motivations for mobilisation in the first place. In this study I consider the new value systems that the *bhakats* of this study engage, but always with a focus on the actions they take as conscient artists to formulate

work which will gain mobility. In doing so, I examine not only the values of the ‘consumer’ (the national audience, the foreign tourist, the British concert-goer) when considering value, but also of the producer. Why do the artists of my study take their art forms into new arenas? What do they have to do in order to achieve this mobility? And what can this tell us more broadly about the production of culture?

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on one community of monastic performers in India: *bhakats* (monks) from Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā (henceforth UKS), a Vaishnavite *sattrā* (monastery) in Assam. I focus especially on the work of Bhabananda Barbayan, a *bhakat* choreographer from UKS who engages in ambitious creative projects both at home and abroad, and on Govinda Kalita, my dance teacher who is also a *bhakat* in UKS. In order to consider the artistic and social implications of the mobilisation of dance in different contexts and to conduct detailed qualitative analysis of the actions of practitioners in relation to each, it was necessary to limit this discussion to one particular troupe. To create a more comprehensive report on the state of the original practitioners of Sattriya dance since the classicisation of their art form in the year 2000, it would be necessary to observe the work of more *bhakats* in a variety of different monasteries. More time and resources would be needed to conduct such a study. It was, however, pressing to produce research which demonstrates that, contrary to dominant narratives about the insularity and intransience of the monastic dancers, proactive and creative work was being done by *bhakats* living within the *sattrā*. Drawing from fieldwork conducted within UKS in 2015 and from secondary materials, Chapters Two and Three examine the performance practices within the *sattrā* and then consider how these practices are choreographed and re-worked in ways which access national recognition and mobilisation. Chapters Four and Five draw from participant observation of a dance tour of the UK in 2016, by the *bhakats* of this study, and the one-hour dance which was choreographed especially for that tour. I consider how the values of the performers and the gatekeepers and audiences they encounter are engaged by these practices and the resulting dance. In Chapter Six, I discuss the value of teaching ‘others’ to dance—through short-term workshops, longer-term engagements and ‘international *bhaona*’ performances—traditional Vaishnavite dance dramas choreographed by Bhabananda Barbayan and performed by students from Europe and America, in European languages. For analysis of mobilisation of dance through teaching, I draw from participant observation of touristic encounters at UKS since 2012, workshops on the UK tour in

2016 and an ‘international *bhaona*’ performance rehearsed and performed in Guwahati in January 2018.

There is a temporal limitation to the study, in that it focuses mainly on the activities of these performers between 2012 and 2018, when I worked with them. Ethnographic work provides a glimpse of practices in a certain time and place. In Chapter Two I explain why this ethnography was conducted at this particular time and place, through a discussion of the social, economic and political factors which brought me into the life of the community of *bhakats* whose practice I discuss. As these connections were made in contexts which involved the mobilisation of dance, this discussion contributes to the larger question of the thesis. This short time-frame of analysis allows me to consider more deeply the motivations and implications of the performers’ practices than a broader historical overview would have done. I do, however, draw on secondary sources (some quite obscure) to position this ethnographic study in historical context. On the other hand, significant political changes are taking place in Assam currently, and the politicisation of the monasteries and an interest in their practices by the Hindu far-right were just beginning to take root as I began to write-up my fieldnotes. Any study of the mobilisation of *sattr*a arts conducted now would have to take these factors into account.

Justification for this study

An ethnographic investigation of *sattriya* performance practices is overdue. Since 2000, when the Indian government recognised the new dance genre ‘Sattriya Dance’ as a ‘Major Indian Dance form’ (a process that is detailed in Chapter Three), there has been no sustained investigation into the part played in this process by the original exponents; how national recognition is now negotiated, resisted and legitimised by their own actions; and in which other contexts these *bhakats* perform, beyond state institutions. With its focus on the actions of middle class, urban revivalists, studies of Sattriya have effaced or misrepresented the contributions of the *bhakats* themselves. This investigation provides a corrective to this effacement and in the process makes two important contributions to South Asian Dance scholarship, and ethnomusicology/ethnochoreology more broadly:

- i. An Ethnography of Classicisation from the perspective of the original practitioners

The first important contribution of this thesis is that it provides the first grounded ethnography exploring the processes of classicisation of an Indian performance practice a) from the perspective of the original practitioners and b) *as they happen*. This study is uniquely positioned to do this and also to provide evidence in the form of comparison between ‘pre-classicised’ and ‘post-classicised’ material. This is because, unlike other ‘Major Indian Dance Forms’, a repertoire considered by the *bhakats* as ‘traditional’ has been maintained in parallel with the post-revival, classical form, allowing for a comparison which reveals the difference made to a dance when it is to be appreciated as ‘classical’. Whilst scholars writing in the late 1990s and 2000s about other classical forms (such as Walker 2014a and 2014b on Kathak; Allen 1997 and Soneji 2012 on Bharatanatyam) no longer have access to the pre-revival movements of dancers to compare with the modern classical forms we see today, an ethnography of UKS’s dance practices allows a comparison of what the *bhakats* dancing both inside (marked ‘traditional’) and outside (marked ‘classical’) the *sattrā*’s gates. The *sattrā* institution did not arouse the scorn of the British Colonial and Indian nationalist leaders in the way *tawā’if* or *devadasi* culture did, and nor did it rely on a zamindari system, so the living context for *sattriya* arts survived colonial reforms. Its practitioners—Hindu, male, upper caste and wielding moral and political power over much of the local population—were in a much stronger position than the forebears of India’s other classical dance forms.⁶ UKS in particular, as I explain in Chapter Two, has been looked upon favourably by Assam’s national elite. If *devadasis* and *tawaiifs* suffered stigmatisation and, in some cases, criminalisation during the revival of their performance practices (see footnote 16), the *bhakats* of UKS have continued to dance pre-revival styles with active encouragement from their revivalists, because of their privileged positions.

Through this comparison, permitted in this unique situation, the thesis also forms a corrective to Indian dance scholarship which has shown the original practitioners of classicised/ ‘revived’ artforms as victims of the process. Scholars have shown that the original practitioners of many of India’s other classical dance forms suffered stigmatisation and marginalisation during the revival of their performance practices over the course of the twentieth century. Ethnographic work on the aftermath of previous classical revivals finds female hereditary performers working in ‘illicit’ environments (Morcom 2013) or not finding work at all (Soneji 2012). Traditional artists who successfully made the transition to modern ‘classical’ dancers, as Walker

⁶ The *sattrā* institution and the social status of its *bhakats* will be discussed in Chapter Two.

observes in the Kathak revival story, ‘distanced themselves from any connection with a professional past’, resulting, in the case of Hindustani traditions, in ‘a forced peeling apart of music and dance’ (Walker 2014a: 95–6). Walker shows that although ‘Indian courtesans through the ages have been described as performing dance-songs,’ in the post-colonial context, many former *tawaiifs* simply stopped dancing as ‘there was a stigma associated with female dancing that was not applied as rigorously to singing’ (ibid.: 96):

The former *tawā'ifs* who remained on the concert stage and in the recording studio as singers ceased dancing and often distanced themselves from it, eschewing any sort of gesture or eye contact. Former courtesans as ‘amateur’ singers could begin to forge a new identity—as ‘dancing girls’, they could not. The women who were supposedly responsible for the degeneration of North Indian culture therefore became a nameless, faceless group of women from the past. (ibid.: 96).

To date, therefore, there are few if any examples in the scholarly literature of viable alternative systems of performance practice today lying outside the control of the dominant nation-state discourses and in the hands of the original holders. Though the hereditary *kathaks* have been presented as ‘traditional practitioners’, and wield significant influence in Kathak dance scene, as Walker has demonstrated, they have had to completely buy into middle-class nation-state discourses in order to attain and retain hegemony (Walker 2014a:14-17). This includes adopting a Brahmin identity, which, as Walker argues, was a conferred identity, produced by post-colonial scholarship, rather than corresponding to inherited connection to that caste (Walker 2014a:84-88). It has also involved participating in the exclusion of the mostly female practitioners who cultivated what we now know as Kathak dance (89-98). According to the scholarship so far, either an artist buys into the middle-class systems, or he or she fails.

My ethnographic work with the *bhakats* of UKS thus describes, for the first time, a post-revival scenario in which the institutions of ‘original practitioners’ thrive independently of state structures. Though the performers in my study have adopted new middle-class-friendly styles in order to access ‘the concert stage’ and have achieved mobility within and beyond India through state institutions, due to conscious and pragmatic mobilisation of their dance form, training, examinations, and a broader repertoire of performance practices remain and thrive within the control of the *sattrā*.

ii. Ethnography of a ‘South-North’ Tour

The second important justification for a study exploring the mobilisation of dance by the *bhakats* of Assam, is in its potential to highlight the motivations and techniques of artists from the ‘global south’ presenting an art form in front of foreign audiences in the ‘global north’.⁷ Most scholarship on music and dance touring practices explore artists moving within ‘scenes’ (i.e. approaching audiences with aligned aesthetic values) and examine musical movement between or around Europe, the USA (such as Ramella 2018a and 2018b and Nóvoa 2012) or focus on artists from the ‘Global South’ who are middle-class and mobile (for example Katrak 2011 and Kedhar 2014 on South Asian dancers). This thesis is unique in that it draws from scholarship on tourism and diaspora—disciplines which consider encounters with the cultural ‘other’—to examine a tour of artistes setting out from a marginalised cultural setting and encountering audiences that—because of imbalances of power and access to representation—possess little or no knowledge of the dancers’ cultural practices. Here, I consider two threads of scholarship which will be helpful in this study and to which this study contributes.

In his study of a tour of Europe by a Texan band, Nóvoa points out that issues of mobility have been neglected in studies of music:

One particular aspect [of ethnographic studies of musicians] stands out: regardless of the approach or object of study, issues of mobility have been neglected. There are some authors that make use of such a concept – like Gregory Booth (1997) or Steph Ceraso (2006). Nevertheless, these authors are discussing social mobility rather than the actual practice of moving between places.

Surprisingly, I could only find one paper that directly deals with the experiences of touring (Stephanie Ng 2005). (Nóvoa 2012:350).

Since Nóvoa’s essay (and inspired by it) A L Ramella has published a number of articles which also explore the life of European and American musicians and music professionals on tour from the perspective of the musicians themselves (Ramella 2018a and 2018b). These ethnographic studies provide an excellent methodological correlative to sociological studies of live music which touch on touring practices in the UK (such as Brennan et al. 2013 and 2019) and the interview-based research published in the *Live*

⁷ The problems with these terms (and their cognates ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’; ‘Developing’ and ‘Developed’ and so on) have been discussed at length by scholars of globalisation (see for example Prashad 2012; Hollington et al 2015; Mahler 2017). I am using it here, with Schwartz (2016) as a ‘shorthand for a complex, historically evolved configuration of global power relations’ (27). The disparities of wealth in South Asia make it hard to position India unproblematically in the ‘global south’—as many hundreds of thousands of Indians have more spending power, influence and mobility than many Europeans and Americans, for example. However, Assamese *bhakats* do not fall into that wealthy and mobile minority, and it is their navigation between spaces associated with ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’—be it Guwahati, Delhi, or London—which interests me here.

Music Census (Ansell et al. 2018) which are unable to account for the motivations of touring artists, or tie them in any meaningful way to larger discourses. Cottrell (2004) mentions that his London-based classical professional musicians tour to make money, as does Wulff in her discussion of transnational ballet circuits (Wulff 1998), but none of these studies examine the processes and details of touring practices. By focusing on the experiential and considering the ‘production and reproduction of musicians’ identities’ (Nóvoa 2012: 367), both Ramella and Nóvoa provide nuanced insights into the motivations for American and European musicians going on tour. However, this work focuses on musicians and artists who tour within a ‘scene’⁸ and whose values therefore closely correspond to the audiences and gatekeepers they meet. Thus, Ramella is able to talk of musicians who feel ‘at home on the road’ (Ramella 2018a:238), and Nóvoa, of artists who experience very little cross-cultural interaction with the places and audiences they encounter:

[W]e can argue that the mobility of these musicians is practically void of meanings of travel, discovery and inter-cultural contact. To engage with Vincent Kaufman’s (2002) theory on mobility, there is very little motility, that is, the potential for being mobile, if we are addressing those same meanings. In fact, the band’s van only moves amid a specific music scene, which is horizontally reproduced throughout space, encapsulating the musicians and hindering them from a deeper contact with local settings. (Nóvoa 2012:356).

Though these studies of touring give a strong sense of the musicians’ motivations and feelings while ‘on the road’, the sorts of intercultural encounters navigated by the *bhakats* of my study whilst on tour have more in common with accounts of music and tourism, such as those examined in Krüger et al. (2013), Hughes-Freeland (2014), in which aesthetics need to be altered in order to be rendered comprehensible and enjoyable to the new audiences. Through these alterations that it is possible to read the contours of the target culture.

In this section I have shown that answering the question ‘why mobilise dance’, in relation to a community of Vaishnavite performers from Assam, will contribute to scholarship on the mobilisation of performance practices between social milieu and locale. In the following section I will consider the theoretical tools I will employ to answer these questions, as well as describing how I settled on this particular approach, given the range of possibilities.

⁸ In the sense of the articulation of a ‘collective identity’ (Bennett 2006:96).

Mobilising Dance: Frameworks for analysis

The scholarship that looks at the sorts of re-contextualisation of dance which this thesis considers (across borders, race, gender and social class) fall under three broad categories: studies of nationalist revivals, tourism studies and studies of cultural globalisation. Studies of national dance revivals are characterised by their focus on the movement of performance practices from social or devotional contexts to the concert stage; from rural to urban settings; from lower class/ caste to middle class/ upper caste milieux. Such shifts usually take place within national borders and are often implicated in, if not actively producing, the formation of national identities (see for example Bithell and Hill 2014; Reed 2002; Askew 2002; Kringelbach 2014; and in the Indian context Schultz 2012; Soneji 2012; Bakhle 2005). Tourism studies consider the practice of dances being performed for or taught to ‘foreign’ audiences in tourist contexts (see, for example Kringelbach and Skinner 2014). Studies of dance and globalisation are concerned with ‘globalised’ dance forms such as salsa and jive, which exist within transnational networks (Skinner 2007; 2012), as well as the development of hybrid dance forms by diaspora communities and other long-term cross-cultural encounters of dance across borders (see Lopez y Royo 2004). In each of these three areas of study, considered in more detail in Chapter One, we find scholars concerned with the shifting value of dance between different environments: from ritual to social to commodity and back again.

These studies, and broader research on music and mobility, provide rich material with which to contextualise some aspects of this study of a dance on the move. However, I found that none of them offered me a theoretical framework which would allow me to follow the performers of my study across the different contexts they navigate, or to make connections between the various translations they perform. Each time I tried to situate their practice in relation to any one of the threads of scholarship—on globalisation, commoditisation, revival, or tourism—I would find myself moving away from the object of study. I would then be forced to fit the practices I was observing into frameworks which only offer a very partial understanding of what the performers were doing and which often contradicted my informants’ self-narratives. For example, although studies of South Asian diasporic arts have yielded extremely useful insights into the production and consumption of South Asian dance and music forms in Britain (see in particular, Iyer 1997; Kabir 2011 and Kedhar 2014) and this offers an insight into the context the *bhakats* would encounter when they toured England in 2016, such work does not provide the analytical tools to understand how and why the

bhakats of my study created a dance form for that tour. It provides an insight into the values of the society consuming their dance, but not into the values of the practitioners who choreographed it. Emphasising the ‘consuming culture’, rather than the producers, in this way also makes it harder to connect my findings to other parts of the study. How, for example, do the processes of mobilisation associated with a tour of the UK relate to the processes associated with getting onto the Indian national stage? In the same way, if I positioned nationalist revival as my central question, I placed too much emphasis on the categorisations and motivations of middle-class outsiders to the tradition, and the object of study—the *bhakats* themselves—slipped away. Recent scholarship on the dance practices of the monks of Assam reflect a similar problem. As I argue in Chapter Three, such studies demonstrate a strong nationalist bias, and their endeavour to demonstrate the value of Assamese Vaishnavite performance practices in nationalistic terms leads to an effacement or misrepresentation of the performers’ values. Nationalist revival is an important part of the recent story of Assamese Vaishnavite dance in recent years, and has provided the monks with the grammar for its mobilisation onto the stage. However, this is only one part of the story. A discussion of monastic activities simply as part of a ‘revival’ process cannot accommodate the performance practices which have been cultivated within the *namghar*—the Assamese Vaishnavite prayer hall where monks perform ritual dances for Lord Krishna. Nor can it be easily related to the performance in the British Museum or a dance workshop in Guwahati.

The only common factor which connects the disparate contexts in which the *bhakats* perform is the performers themselves. Therefore, the performers should be the starting point for understanding the processes of mobilisation they engage with, rather than the other way round. The first question is therefore this: why do *bhakats* mobilise their dances? Asking this question which allows me to approach the myriad questions about *value* that emerged throughout my research: what value does it have to dance in a ‘classical’ style? What is the value of touring? Of teaching foreigners to dance? The second question is how, if at all, these values compare to those who are engaged with the dance (foreign audiences, Indian dance critics) and those who mobilise culture (the people who issue visas, travel grants, performance opportunities and international connections)? What choreographic and production choices to the *bhakats* make in order to create value for those cultural gatekeepers instrumental in mobilising their dance?

Graeber’s Theory of Value

As I sought to answer these questions, I needed to interrogate the meaning of the term ‘value’. What is implied when, in a sociological sense, we think of something being ‘valuable’ or not? In dealing with this question in his 2001 book *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, David Graeber examines the influential considerations of value in Appadurai’s ‘Social Life of Things’ (1986) and in Bourdieu’s work on ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1977; 1990) as well as his essay “Marginalia—Some Additional Notes on the Gift.” (1997). According to Graeber, these two works, have been foundational for recent discussions of intercultural exchange in a post-modern, globalised world. However, Graeber argues, both Appadurai and Bourdieu offer an ‘economistic’ notion of value which reduces exchange (of commodities as well as of intangible things like services, education, status) to ‘a system governed by the laws of interested calculation, competition, or exploitation’ (Bourdieu 1997, cited in Graeber 2001:28). This tendency is reflected in accounts which emphasise the rock music industry as a model example of touring culture, and focus on its economic logic, for example, in Brennan et al.:

In this rock model, the value of live music was [...] primarily a means of promoting record sales, the scope and organisation of live tours were determined by an album’s sales budget. (2019:24).

As I discuss in Chapter One, this tendency is reflected in many of the studies on tourism, globalisation and dance, which consistently privilege the standpoint of the consumer and frequently reduce the producer’s motivation to economics. *The UK Live music Census 2017 Report* (Ansell et. al 2018) consciously resists this approach and after the first chapter, which considers the economic value of culture, spends the following four chapters considering a number of different types of ‘value’, as articulated by Holden (2004), including historical, social, symbolic, aesthetic and spiritual value, ‘non-use’ values (such as ‘existence value’, ‘option value’ and ‘bequest value’). Graeber, similarly dissatisfied with analytical tools designed to reduce value to mere economics, seeks to re-evaluate the term through an examination of societies with gift economies, in which objects and services are given away without a fixed exchange value, or clear notion of reciprocity (2001:7, 209). Drawing on the insights of anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss, Nancy Munn, Annette Weiner and Marilyn Strathern, he builds an alternative theory of ‘value’ that is not wedded to reductive economistic models, but allows for a more nuanced study of the meaning of ‘giving things away’. In *Valuing Dance*, Susan Leigh Foster draws from both economistic models and Graeber’s ‘gift’ model for a study of dance as ‘commodities and gifts in motion’ (2017:1). She argues that commodification is but one aspect of a broader set of

motivations for the mobilisation of dance, and suggests considering dance from the perspective of the ‘gift’ allows for a far richer appreciation of its uses and meanings. Inspired by Graeber and Foster, I therefore consider value from this perspective, which provides four insights which are particularly revealing in this study of the value of mobilising dance.

i. Building Social Relations

One of the primary motivations for mobilising dance into different arenas, which was frequently expressed by *bhakats* from UKS—the monastery in which I conducted my Assam-based fieldwork—was the desire to ‘spread knowledge about Krishna’ (fieldnote diaries August 22nd 2016; Paris interview 2017; *bhakat* interviewed at 20:08 in Petite 2008). Sankaradeva, the 16th-century founder of the strand of Vaishnavism adhered to in UKS, and his principle devotee Madhabadeva, advocated a doctrine of *bhakti*—direct devotion towards the Lord—through chanting the name of God. The *bhakats* of Assam praise God by singing about him, dancing to songs about him, dancing *for* him and performing danced depictions of his life (which they refer to as *Krishna lila*). The dance practices of the *sattras* have a performative role in and of themselves: they keep the world resonating with the sound of Krishna’s name, and the memory of his life in Vrindavan. Sonaram Sarma Burhabhakat, a *bhakat* from the Titabor branch of Kamalabari Sattras, provides a scriptural justification for this:

The significance of this chant [of the name of the Lord] is found in the scripture *Anadi Patan* composed by the Guru (Sankaradeva). According to this scripture, the Lord [Krishna] instructed Brahma to create all creatures that could walk, swim, fly or live under water. Brahma complied with the Lord’s instruction but he failed to infuse life into the beings that he had created. Helpless, he prayed earnestly to the Lord. The Lord breathed life into the created beings by entering within them as their souls. Delighted, Brahma began to chant the name of Hari with the created beings and the world resounded with their repeated chants. (Sarma Burhabhakat 2013:46)

When I questioned various *bhakat* performers in UKS about their feelings about the recent national recognition of their dance practices, and their increased popularity in India and abroad, their response was overwhelmingly positive: ‘It’s good. Very good.’ my teacher Govinda told me in a dance lesson in August 2016, ‘because it brings *focus* [fame/ recognition] to Sankaradeva’s teachings... to Krishna.’ Reaching ever larger audiences, is at the heart of the *bhakats* self-narrative: dancing is in itself an act of worship, and sharing that dancing is valued as a way of spreading the word. As I

demonstrate in Chapter Three, the performance practices of the monasteries were developed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva as a vehicle for proselytisation, so valuing dance as a way of spreading Vaishnavism has the sanction of precedent.

Mobilising dance in order to connect to people as an end in itself (rather than seeing it as a way to earn more money or gain more prestige) can be understood as a form of gift economy. Graeber draws on the Maussian notion that ‘Gifts act as a way of creating social relations’ (Graeber 2001: 27). When something is exchanged for money or for something of equal wealth, it is severed from the giver, because the buyer has no sense of obligation towards them anymore. A gift, on the other hand, might create a sense of obligation towards the giver: at the very least, a social connection has been created; at best, the receiver of the gift might reciprocate (ibid.:33). Graeber paraphrases ‘the core of Mauss’ argument’ in relation to the Maori: ‘the obligation to return a gift is, for the Maori, due to the identity of the gift being caught up in that of its original owner.’ (Graeber 2001:183). In the gift, remains something of the giver. They cannot be forgotten, because whatever was exchanged was not paid for and therefore symbolically removed from the ownership of the giver. Foster argues that considering dancing in relation to gift value is especially fruitful, because of ‘dance’s capacity to summon people into relation’ (2019:37). In order to be consumed, learning to dance and live performances of dance—unlike the commodities exchanged in Appadurai’s model, for example—require people to get together. In dance then, not only is the ‘giver in the gift’ figuratively speaking, the ‘giver’ has a bodily connection to the gift, either by being physically present, or having their physical movements replicated by a dance student.

Though in some cases *bhakats* charge a fee for the very occasional dance lessons they manage to organise, commoditisation is, over all, a rather insignificant aspect of their mobilisation of their dance and appears to be part of a bigger picture to disseminate knowledge of ‘their culture’ rather than to make money. On tour, the *bhakats* received subsistence payments; I also observed that in UKS tourists often came to the monastery, watched and left without paying; and Bhabananda Barbayan, the *bhakat* whose work I focus on in most detail in this this, frequently undertakes projects which result in personal financial loss. However, the outcome of all these interactions, as I demonstrate in Chapters Four and Six in particular, was longer-term relationships which led to more possibilities for building ever larger audiences. Though they do not consciously articulate a sense of having a ‘gift economy’, understanding the monks’ deployment of ‘dance as a resource’ (Foster 2019:37-38) in this way helps to understand

the mobilisation of dance in a way that is closer to the *bhakats*' experience than most theories of exchange, or studies based on similar assumptions, permit.

ii. Gaining 'fame'

For the *bhakats* of my study, calling people into relation through dance is both an end in itself, and also a means to an end. As I described above, having people dancing together is a way of praising Krishna and creating a community of *bhakti* (devotion). However, the deployment of dance is also used strategically. New projects and choreographies are created in ways that will not just please new audiences (the audiences in London and the cognoscenti of Kolkata, for example) but that will please the gatekeepers of mobility—those who decide whether or not a cultural practice will reach larger audiences or not.⁹ In her study of Gawa, or the Triobands, Mann describes a situation in which gift giving allows Gawans to expand influence 'over space and time'. Graeber paraphrases Mann's findings, to explain the implications of how giving something away strategically can expand a society's reach:

[Giving away food] implies extension of one's control over space and time. If that someone else hails from overseas, giving food creates alliances that one can then activate so as to act on increasingly higher levels of exchange, enabling one to exchange more durable valuables like shell ornaments or canoes, and by doing so exercising even greater control of inter-subjective spacetime. (Graeber 2001:44).

Seeing the value of dance as a medium through which the *bhakats* of my study are able to 'create alliances' and 'exercise control' becomes particularly useful when seeing their work in relation to the historical and social context of Assam, and their position within that context. The *bhakats* of Assam face marginalisation at a local, national and international level. In Chapter Two, I explain that Assam has been a marginalised part of British India, which continues to be dominated by the modern Indian state government both physically (with the heavy presence of the national army) and discursively (as it is written out of the national imaginary). In Chapter Three, I show that the nation-builders who created a new vision of the Assamese state in dialogue with this history of marginalisation, have in turn spoken for and frequently mis-represented the *sattrā* institution. In Chapter Four, I show how the unconscious bias towards middle

⁹ In fact, in Chapters Three and Five, I give examples of instances where, in their efforts to correspond to the values of cultural gatekeepers, the *bhakats* create work that is at times *less* accessible to the audiences they eventually reach.

class and urban performers by the ICCR, the cultural body which supports Indian artists to tour abroad, has led to a third level of marginalisation of the *bhakat* performers of this study: they very rarely tour outside India. Through various case studies, I demonstrate how, for the *bhakats* of my study, strategically ‘giving away’ dance is a powerful way to gain influence and re-claim self-representation across all these spheres.

iii. Creating value through action

Thinking about the value of mobilisation in this way helps to create a picture of practitioners themselves as *active agents* of globalisation, rather than passive recipients, or even victims. It is this emphasis on the agency of the producer—based on a Marxist notion that ‘the value of commodities is derived from the human labor that went into producing them’ (ibid. 26)—which gives Munn’s notion of value its particular strength for exploring the mobilisation of a dance between different cultural arenas. As I argue in Chapter Four, one of the difficulties of relating the experiences of the *bhakats* of my study with the proponents of other forms of ‘globalised dance’ (like salsa, ballet, belly dance etc) which have received the most scholarly attention, was that these dances are taught in dance schools, offered as workshops and already have supporting ecologies of promoters, venues and audiences. A salsa dancer looking to ‘go global’ could now connect up with these already-existing networks. The *bhakats* of my study are not in touch with these networks; rather, they needed to build their own. Rather than coming from a structuralist perspective that sees the *bhakats* simply reacting to, or conforming with already existing networks, this theory allows for an exploration of how these structures are created in the first place, through action:

Note that all this is not a matter of “entering into” higher spheres or even levels of exchange that already exist. It is these actions—of hospitality, travel, and exchange—that create the levels in the first place. And at their most basic this is all “levels”—indeed, all such abstract “structures”—are. They consist of human actions. Where Strathern starts her analysis from a web of social relationships, then, Munn starts from a notion of activity. Value emerges in action; it is the process by which a person’s invisible “potency”—their capacity to act—is transformed into concrete, perceptible forms. (Graeber 2001:45).

This idea becomes useful when considering how *bhakat* performers of Assam—in particular Bhabananda Barbayan—create new networks and access ever larger ‘spheres’ through their own actions: by choreographing dances which are intended to interpolate new audiences and then gaining mobility in doing so. The value in mobilising *sattriya* practices is that they create networks and pathways.

iv. Being recognised

Having started to create a model which focuses on the motivations of the ‘giver’ (the producer) of an object or service, Graeber then looks for a way to understand the relationship between the values of the person who has made it, and those of the ‘receiver’. In this case study, the first step is then to understand the value of mobilisation, and the second to understand what sort of work needs to be done in order to make the dance valuable to ‘someone else’ so that the *bhakats* can make themselves as visible to a larger collective: be it the nation state, or an imagined ‘international’ scene. The last point I wish to draw out from Graeber’s discussion of value is therefore in relation to the audiences and cultural gatekeepers who ‘receive’ the gift of dance from the *bhakats* of my study. As Graeber points out, even if we consider value as being ‘the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves’, value is only created with ‘that importance being recognized by someone else’ (ibid: 45).

It is clear that the bureaucrats running the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the British Museum are not particularly interested in the proselytisation of Assamese Vaishnavism. How then, do the *bhakats* make their dance valuable to these cultural gatekeepers? Here it is useful to consider Graeber’s discussion of Marilyn Strathern’s notion of the ‘partible’ or ‘multiple’ person (an alternative to the notion of the ‘individual’) who represents various latent values, only some of which will be recognised by the another person:

People have all sorts of potential identities, which most of the time exist only as a set of hidden possibilities. What happens in any given social situation is that another person fixes on one of these and thus “makes it visible.” One looks at a man, say, as a representative of his clan, or as one’s sister’s husband, or as the owner of a pig. Other possibilities, for the moment, remain invisible. [/] It is at this point that a theory of value comes in: because Strathern uses the phrase “making visible” and “giving value” more or less interchangeably. (Graeber 2001: 39-40)

In the context of Melanesian gift giving which Strathern is describing, if a “multiple” person gives a gift and if, as we saw above, there is always something of the giver in the gift, the meaning/value of that object is latent, and the receivers only ‘make them visible’ (Graeber 2001:39). This is a useful way to consider encounters with dance in different contexts, because whilst it acknowledges the importance of the role of the receiver—in this case the audiences and the gatekeepers who enable the mobilisation of *sattriya* arts—as the ones who make value visible, that value is already latent in the dance. It has been creative labour of the dancers, and *their* social relations (as *bhakats*,

as part of the *sattrā* institution) which have imbued the dance with value. Each case study of this thesis demonstrate the ways in which Bhabananda Barbayan and the other *bhakats* of my study foreground certain aspects of their performance practices in configurations they think will make this value ‘visible’ in the new contexts they encounter.

Chapter Outline

The thesis traces a roughly circular journey. After providing the methodological groundwork in Chapter One, I starting with a discussion of the monastery in rural Assam in Chapter Two. I then consider the performance practices of the *bhakats* in relation to the state capital of Guwahati and the national capital of New Delhi, in Chapter Three. Chapters Four and Five follow the *bhakats* as they travel to the UK, and then, in Chapter Six, the final case study considers interactions with foreign students in the UK, in Guwahati, and then follows their practice back to the monastery. Here I offer a brief summary of the material covered and the main arguments of each chapter.

Chapter One – Methodology and Literature Review, provides an overview of the methods that I used to gather the material used in this study and the theoretical tools I use to analyse my findings. I discuss the methodological toolkit I brought to this study—namely, embodied ethnography. The principal methodology was participant observation conducted between 2012 and 2016 in UKS on Majuli Island. Drawing from the literature of ethnographers (particularly Barz and Cooley 2008 and Bell et al. 1993), in particular ethnochoreologists (eg. Buckland 1999; Royce 1977; Kaeppler 2000), I explain why I chose this particular methodology to understand practices of mobility amongst Assamese *bhakat*, and how it manifested in a) me learning to dance in UKS and b) me travelling with the *bhakats* on tour. I then describe how this worked out in practice and how my own experiences resonate with—and contribute to—current scholarly debates on gender and power in field research. Returning to Graeber’s notion of ‘value’, I consider my role as scholar-advocate in the mobilisation of Assamese dance: something that I return to in Chapter Six, in my discussion of the value of teaching dance to foreigners. In the final part of the chapter, I review the literature that has considered the mobilisation of dance across social class, bodies and geographies, as mentioned above, and show how theory stand in relation to the phenomenon of presenting dance for ‘others’. I demonstrate the particular insights that are to be gained from an ethnography of dance on tour, thinking in particular about the ‘value’ of dance

as it moves through different contexts. This chapter sets the context for the case studies which make up the remainder of the thesis.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the place and people I was working with, drawing from my own field practice, observations and interviews as well as secondary research by M Neog (1965; 1983), P Neog (2008), K Goswami (2004) and unpublished doctoral research by S Goswami (2015), S Nath (2010) M Sarma (2015) and Sethi (2013). I describe the physical structure and functioning of the *sattrā* (monastery) where the *bhakats* of my study live and work, and then explain how the twentieth-century revival of interest in Assamese Vaishnavism amongst urban literate writers has led to a back-projection of the religion as a democratic, nationalist, modern-rationalist belief system. By locating UKS socially and historically, I am able to show why the doctrine of that institution, whilst by no means reflecting the views of the majority of Assamese Vaishnavites, has nonetheless dominated recent scholarship on Assamese Vaishnavism. I also acknowledge that by engaging with UKS, I therefore document a set of practices which, while reflecting dominant narratives around Assamese Vaishnavism, is in fact partial.

The third chapter focuses on a particular performance practice, known as the *cali nach*, which—in the *sattrā* context—is a group dance for five to six dancers which consists of ‘pure’ (i.e. non-mimetic) dance moves, is accompanied by percussion and song, and directed towards the holy book, which is placed at the far eastern end of the hall. I compare this to a different version of the *cali nach*—one that is designed for the proscenium arch stage and with different audiences in mind—which was taught to me in a purpose-built auditorium just outside the *sattrā* gates in 2015. Using these two iterations of nominally the ‘same’ dance as a case study, I consider the ways in which the *bhakat* performers organise performance material in order to make its value recognisable to different cultural gatekeepers and therefore gain access to mobility beyond the *sattrā*. The next part of the chapter then offers a corrective to some of the assumptions in recent scholarship about the value of *sattriya* arts as ‘pure devotion’. Looking at historical evidence, I point out that dance has been valued as a force for proselytisation and bringing social groups into relation. Describing *sattriya* arts as pure ‘ritual’ or ‘devotion’ is indicative of nationalist tendencies to circumscribe pure, ‘pre-modern’ religious practice, which is of limited use in describing the value of dance to the *bhakats* of Assam.

In order to contextualise the ‘classicised’ iteration of the *cali nach*, I then examine the nationally recognised notion of ‘Indian Classical Dance’, considering the creation of

this category, and the historical and social reasons why certain aesthetics became favoured over others. I then examine the revivalist activities of scholars, dancers and activists during the twentieth century which sought to represent *sattrā* performance practices as ‘classical dance’ along these lines. I then show how a ‘classicised’ iteration of the *cali nach* demonstrates the *bhakats*’ ability to arrange material in a way that meets the aesthetic norms which will achieve national recognition, whilst continuing to maintain a separate stream demonstrating different values. Through this case study I consider how the *bhakats* create dances which will be valued both at a national and local level and maintain their control of the dance genre, even while strategically ‘giving it away’.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, I focus on my second case study: a project conceived by Bhabananda Barbayan to travel to the UK to see the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ textile in the British Museum, and tour the country with a performance called *Vrindavani Paal*, which responds to the textile through dance. The British Museum ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ is named after a legendary cloth—the ‘*vṛndāvēni vastra*’—a 180-foot cloth which ‘depicted Kṛṣṇa’s life in Vṛndāvaṇa’—in the *caritas*, the traditional biographies of Assamese Vaishnavite founder Sankaradeva and his early apostles (Neog 1965: 120, fn 120). In these chapters, I consider the value of mobilising dance overseas and then, as in Chapter Three, I think about the ways in which Bhabananda presents his dance in such a way that it will be valued by the gatekeepers to that mobility: in this case, the ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations, who sponsored the artists’ flights, visas and fees), the Arts Council England (who sponsored their stay and domestic travel and the production of the tour; henceforth ACE) and the British Museum (who were one of the hosts of the tour). Just as with the *cali nach*, which is not only altered in its content, but also in the sorts of *places* and *contexts* in which it is appropriate to dance, the *Vrindavani Paal* demonstrates mobility not only through these questions of content and style, but the very contexts in which it is moved. In Chapter Four, therefore, I think about how Bhabananda and his troupe mobilised their dance into particular contexts which would add value for the gatekeepers of culture. It asks what systems of value were being negotiated by including the British Museum in London and the Hindu Temple in Newcastle, in the tour. I focus in particular on Bhabananda’s decision to create a dance based on the British Museum’s ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ and the varying sorts of value attributed to this important artefact. Through this discussion, a complex picture of overlapping values and perceived values emerges. In Chapter Five, I then think about ways in which, just as with the *cali nach*, different performative aspects of *Vrindavani*

Paal—songs, artists, dance genres, objects, actions, costumes and instruments—are re-shaped, ordered or emphasised in ways which Bhabananda believes will allow the dance to gain value in the eyes of the gatekeepers of mobility.

Where Chapter Three considers social mobility, and Chapters Four and Five consider mobility across geographical space, in Chapter Six, I think about the ‘mobilisation’ of dance across bodies. What is the value, for the *bhakats*, in teaching their dance to foreign students? I discuss this question in relation to three particular types of dance teaching, differentiated by the length of engagement and the geographical location. The first part considers the value of teaching *sattrā* performance practices to tourists, through a discussion of a number of interactions with tourists and tourists-turned-students which have led to *bhakats* gaining access to the countries of origin. The second part considers the value of workshops whilst on tour, which have the dual value of enabling access to funding by the ACE, which favours ‘participation’, and of creating an image of desirability of *sattrā* dance which is reflected back, via social media, to Assamese audiences ‘back home’. The third part expands this discussion of the creation of desirability through a discussion of the ‘international bhaona’ performances conceived and choreographed by Bhabananda Barbayan. These performances of Vaishnavite plays written by the poet-saint Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva star students from European and American universities, which, according to Bhabananda, attracts local audiences who value western culture for its perceived glamour and broad appeal. In all three examples, we see how ‘giving’ dance to others, just as in Graeber’s extrapolation of Munn’s studies, creates social connections and builds the paths for mobility that the *bhakats* seek recognition and visibility. In each case, the *bhakats* consciously to re-shape and select material so it has value for these student ‘gatekeepers’ of mobility.

In the final chapter, I consider the limitations of the thesis, and the contributions it makes to anthropological and historical studies of Indian performance practice, and to dance studies more broadly. I argue that following the activities of the *bhakat* performers of Assam as they navigate national platforms and build networks to access international exposure allows for a fruitful comparison between various types of ‘cultural mobilisation’ which are usually studied discretely. I also show that a case study which focuses on the producer rather than the consumer and on marginalised rather than mobile artists is particularly useful for shedding light on the value systems inherent in the production of culture.

Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

In this chapter I discuss the research methods I employed and the literature I engaged with in order to consider questions about making value through mobilising dance. I thus provide a critical examination of how I gathered the material on Assamese Vaishnavism and its related performance practices, which provides the basis for my case studies in the following chapters. My thesis combines ethnography and performance analysis, critical analysis of the scholarship on Assamese Vaishnavism and its related performance practices, and engages with sociological, historical and anthropological scholarship on national revival, tourism and globalisation of dance. In the first part of this chapter, I explain why I chose ethnography as a principal methodology.

‘Ethnography’ encompasses a broad range of approaches, of which I focus on two: firstly ‘mobile’ ethnography (Sheller and Urry 2006)—moving and travelling with the subjects of my study—and the related notion of ‘embodied’ ethnography: gaining a kinaesthetic knowledge of the dance forms that I was studying by learning to dance myself (Buckland 1999 and Kaeppler 2000). In what follows, I discuss these field methods and bring attention to some of the potential issues of power and knowledge latent in such a methodology. As Theresa J Buckland puts it ‘self-critical awareness of the moral dilemmas of social relations can no longer be evaded in print: they are a public part of every ethnography’ (Buckland 1999:4). As well as the now well-rehearsed questions of power inherent in a white Western scholar producing knowledge about an ‘exotic other’ (Said 1995), my specific relationship with my *bhakat* informants (including tour manager, producer and entrepreneur as well as friend) needs to receive some specific attention. What are the implications of being financially involved with my informants? How might it affect the way they represent themselves to me, or that I write about them?

As well as power questions, I consider the implications of my gender in fieldwork—what might it mean to be a woman conducting ethnography in an all-male monastery, and how might this impact my research? What too, does it mean to be a ‘mother in the field’? How did the presence of my son at the monastery shape my research? In answering these questions, I relate my experiences to the reflections of other ethnographer parents whose children become part of their ‘presence in the field’ (for example Schrijvers 1993).

Throughout the discussion, I respond to the call across ethnographic scholarship (see Cooley and Barz 2008; Buckland 1999; Bell et al. 1993; Clifford 1983; Kaeppler 2000) for reflexivity—to explain how I got to learn the things that I discuss in this thesis. In the section entitled ‘autoethnography’ I therefore include narrative accounts which reveal a) how I selected UKS as my site of study; b) how I gained an understanding of the ‘context’ of the performing arts cultivated by the *bhakats* of UKS (daily routine; interview techniques); and c) the techniques I used to analyse the ‘text’ of these performing arts: through observation, dance lessons, scrutiny of video footage and extended interviews. My inclusion of auto-ethnography is not merely for descriptive purposes, or to prove that ‘I was there’.¹ It is intended as an explicit corrective to the myth of the impartial omnipresent observer that has been critiqued in studies ‘declaring the demise of ethnographic authority’ (Bell 1999:1). In writing myself into this text, I join the tradition of women ethnographers who grappled with self-positionality and anticipated the ‘reflexive turn’ in anthropology (Bell 1999:2):

Women have been conspicuous for their consideration of the impact of their presence in the field as an element in their ethnography. Theirs is a gender-inflected voice, which cannot masquerade as universal: they have a standpoint and cannot pretend otherwise (Barry 1989; Bujra 1973; Gordon 1988; Mohanty 1987; Warren 1988). (Bell 1999:2).

Describing the identity of the ethnographer, however, is not simply about establishing the limitations and bias of their perspective. It is also a way of showing how their presence amongst the society they study might actually produce certain reactions and effect the very social structures and relations that they are studying. Any ethnographer represents a new social presence amongst the society being studied, and it is impossible to ignore the new dynamics that are created by the presence of an outsider. Benhabib considers a standpoint that acknowledges this as ‘moral maturity’:

The contextuality, narrativity and specificity of a woman’s moral judgement is [...] a manifestation of woman’s moral maturity that views the self as being immersed in networks of relations with others (cited in Bell 1999:6)

Gaining access to information, for any ethnographer, requires spending time with people, gaining their trust and, in many cases, turns into friendships and on-going collaboration and work. The way people will act and the sorts of things they will say in interviews will necessarily be effected by their prior, multiple and evolving relationship with the ethnographer. Pointing out how I know Bhabananda, and what he knows of

¹ Grau warns that ‘The inclusion of the researcher into the analysis [...] may equally lead to ego trips and confessional anthropology’ (1999:164).

me, for example, will help to contextualise some of the ways he responds to my questions, which may have provoked different answers if asked by someone else.

In the final section, I consider the literature on national dance revivals and various forms of globalisation which provide useful ways of thinking about the mobilisation of dance and the concomitant encounters with ‘other’ audiences. I show how this study speaks to and furthers this current scholarship on these areas.

Ethnographic Field Methods

According to Barz and Cooley, ethnography is ‘the observation of and the description (or representation) of cultural practices—in the case of ethnomusicologists the focus is on musical practices.’ (2008:4). It is a particularly useful methodology to engage in this study first and foremost, because it helps us to focus on the dance producers themselves, as Buckland puts it:

People make dances and it is this agency of production which has often been neglected in mainstream paradigms for the study of dance (Buckland 1999:3).

This is important in a study which, as I argue in the introduction focused on the *production* of value, not only the consumption of it. There are two important aspects to address about the way in which I ‘observed’ the cultural practices of the *bhakats* of UKS. Though part of my research took the form of the Malinowskian fieldwork model—of immersing myself in the locale where my informants live and work—the cultural practices that interested me took place in various places: the *sattrā* on Majuli Island of course, but also the Kalakshetra arts academy in Assam’s state capital of Guwahati and also, importantly, on tour of the UK. Thus, I engaged what Sheller and Urry have referred to as ‘mobile ethnography’—travelling alongside a mobile subject. Related to this through its emphasis on embodied engagement and the movement of the ‘participant observer’ (see Clifford 1983 on the historical emergence of this field method in the first half of the twentieth century) is the notion of ‘embodied ethnography’. I immersed myself physically in Assamese Vaishnavite experience by living in a simple dorm room, of the same style as the *bhakats* of my study, for several months—by eating the same food in the same way (on the floor, with my hands), and keeping the same hours (dawn until dusk). Moreover, I engaged in learning the dance...

i. ‘Mobile ethnography’

In order to understand the mobilisation of the dance forms developed by the *bhakats* of UKS I could not simply stay in the monastery and conduct what Cooley and Barz refer to as the ‘normative twelve-month fieldwork model’, in which a scholar visits a region for a year, undergoes total immersion in a localised ‘culture’, learns a local language and, on returning home to a metropolitan ‘centre’, writes up their fieldwork (Cooley and Barz 2008:14). My ‘field’ is multi-sited (Marcus 1995; Falzon, 2009; Hellermann and Coleman 2012); spans ‘home’ as much as ‘abroad’ (Stock and Chiener 2008), and involves multiple trips and on-going communication with performers and stakeholders via email, Facebook and WhatsApp.² Therefore, it became necessary to employ an approach to my multiple and changing field of study which Sheller and Urry have referred to as ‘mobile ethnography’:

There are several emerging forms of ‘mobile ethnography’, which involve participation in patterns of movement while conducting ethnographic research. [...] Such a mobilised ethnography could involve ‘walking with’ people as a form of deep engagement in their worldview. [...] Through what we might call ‘copresent immersion’ the researcher can be copresent within modes of movement and then employ a range of observation, interviewing, and recording techniques (Urry and Sheller 2006:218).

As I wanted to understand the mobilisation of dance beyond the *sattrā*, it was important that I was able to travel with the performers of my study. My ‘field site’ therefore covers a broad range of places. Insights into touring practices come from a variety of mobile experiences. To give one example, in January 2015 I took ten monks to perform at a festival in Thimpu, Bhutan. We travelled by train from Guwahati to the Bhutan border where we waited for thirteen hours to receive permission to enter Bhutan. In Bhutan, we drive by bus to Thimpu. This experience of being ‘on the road’ with the touring artists gave me a number of useful insights I would not have gained had I simply observed their performance in Thimpu, or interviewed them about it later, as adverse experiences are often left out of the *bhakats* accounts, along with protocols of politeness which proscribe avoiding negative subjects. The reason we were held up at the border for so long is that, despite the fact that Indian citizens are technically allowed to travel without a permit into Bhutan, the troupe of eleven *bhakats* did not appear like the usual business travellers that cross the border each day. Since the 1970s, insurgents (part of the various separatist struggles which have plagued Assamese history) have used Bhutan as a place to hide from Indian government forces and for training camps.

² See Cooley, Meizal, and Syed 2008, for a discussion of the opening up of the ‘field’ enabled by electronic communications.

Our group was seen as suspicious and we had to undergo lengthy identity checks. We were finally allowed to proceed when I called members of the Thimpu festival team who managed to get a royal instruction sent to the border to allow us entry. ‘Walking with’ the performers I study gave me an insight into the restrictions on mobility faced by the *bhakat* performers, even to a neighbouring country. It also allowed me to observe their calm and patient conduct and positive conduct with border guards. They never mentioned the incident to me or anyone at the festival again.

Another important instance of ‘mobile’ ethnography—of particular significance to this study, was travelling with the troupe of eleven artists around the UK in 2016. I met the monks at Heathrow airport on 7th July 2016 and remained with them until they flew out of Newcastle on 17th July 2016. My understanding of the value of this tour to the *bhakat* performers was enhanced by observing them as they took time to sight-see, posted selfies on Facebook and commented—in casual conversations as well as interviews—about the significance of travelling round the UK, and what they got out of the various interactions with workshop participants and audiences.

‘Mobile ethnography’ is a type of embodied encounter—where the scholar is able to immerse him or herself fully into the activity that is being observed. By undertaking the work of a tour manager (buying train tickets, ensuring everyone has food, making sure everyone has mirrors and water back stage etc) I participated in the processes I was observing. In this way, I aimed to gain ‘experientially based knowledge’ (Abu-Lughod 1990; Stacey 1988) and, working alongside the subjects of my study would diminish the border between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’.

ii. Producing knowledge of the ‘other’

In a study which relies so heavily on ethnographic fieldwork and observation, it is imperative to acknowledge the unequal power relations which characterise a knowledge-making exercise of this kind. It is important to consider my (familiar) status as a white, English academic claiming knowledge about a cultural ‘other’ who live in a former colony of England, and the second is my (less familiar) position as an entrepreneur-turned ethnographer who works with and produces the very performers she analyses. As Clifford asks:

How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined, cross cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more-or-less discrete "other world," composed by an individual author? (Clifford 1988:121).

According to James Clifford, the methodological model of a European/ American anthropologist immersing themselves in fieldwork and then returning home to write up their field findings was the dominant conception of field research between 1900 and 1960 but ‘it has recently become possible to identify and take a certain distance from these conventions’ (Clifford 1988:121).

How does my project of claiming knowledge of an ‘other’ culture distance itself from these conventions and address the problem of unequal power relations (the ‘knowledge maker’ and the ‘employer’) embedded in my research process? How do contemporary ethnographers, ‘strive to define for themselves new roles as fieldworkers in the lingering shadows of colonialism’ (Barz and Cooley 2008:6)? I see myself attempting this in three main ways. The first is by remaining open about my own subjectivity and stating my various subject positions at the outset, so I cannot be charged with claiming objectivity or totality of knowledge. In the section entitled ‘autoethnography’, I present precisely who this ‘author’ is, allowing the reader to analyse my findings with a sense of the possible biases and limitations that may be inherent. I assist the reader in doing this by making explicit how these biases may affect my findings. For example, by stating that I met the subjects of my study while on tour sourcing artists who were willing to engage with visits by tourists under the auspices of my own company Sound Travels, I make it evident that I am speaking a group at least in part selected for their interest in reaching foreign audiences.

I also make it clear from the outset that my statements are about a particular community of Assamese Vaishnavites, and their practices of mobilisation of performance practices. My study should not be seen as a statement about all *bhakats* from all *sattras*, and as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, *bhakats* from other strands of Assamese Vaishnavism are likely to experience mobility in very different ways. If any generalities are to be drawn from this work, it is about the mobilisation of dance, and the relationship between artists, art and the gatekeepers of culture it elucidates. This thesis should not be read as a statement about the activities of all Assamese Vaishnavite performers, or a definitive statement about Sattriya and *sattrra* arts: on the contrary it is intended to show their multifaceted nature and co-existence on various planes.

The second way in which I address the unequal power relations of the traditional ethnographic encounter is my engagement of ‘dialogic and reflexive ethnography’ (Buckland 1999:7), in on-going discussions with Bhabananda Barbayan (the choreographer and co-producer of the UK tour) and Govinda Kalita (my dance teacher).

Initially, I lacked the vocabulary and the understanding of rhythmic cycles, the meaning of gestures and what are considered the start and end of movement clusters. For both of the two dances which I scrutinise in detail in this thesis, I followed an on-going cycle of observing performances, attempting moves myself, reading theory, asking questions of my informants, transcribing the dance, have my informants read it through, asking questions, going back to film footage and theory, re-drafting the dance description and so on. As Buckland argues

[C]ulturally codified movement systems are constituted in discursive practice. Word and action are thus dynamic communicative knowledges with which the ethnographer continually engages [...]
(Buckland 1999:6-7)

In order to assist with the process of shedding any subconscious cultural bias I may bring as I perceive performance practices (Johnson Jones 1999:104), I made a conscious and continued effort to deepen my understanding of the dance I was observing according to the terms of analysis and notions of meaning and structure that the choreographer-dancers were using.

The third way in which my research attempts to resist the ‘shadow’ of orientalist discourse is in the reciprocal nature of my interactions with the *bhakats* of my study. One of the main charges about the inequality of relationships in ethnographic fieldwork is the fact that ethnographers gain prestige and make a living from acquiring knowledge generally freely from the subjects of their study, who may even take time away from their own chores and paid work to do so. Ethnographers are often supported by an academic grant to undertake fieldwork and then may profit (in much rarer cases) from sales of books filled with the free knowledge they gained. Anne Grodzins Gold responded to this imbalance by making her chief informant, the ‘local scholar’ Bhoju Ram Gujar (see Nahachewsky 1999 for a discussion of the notion of the ‘local scholar’) the co-author of her monograph on Rajasthan (Gold and Gujar 2002). I was a recipient of an AHRC grant to research and write this thesis and (hopefully) the prestige conferred by gaining a doctoral degree. What benefit could the *bhakat* informants be said to have gained from the hours of time they spent with me each day? Beyond the 200 INR (around £2) I paid per dance lesson, and the rent we paid for staying in the monastery guesthouse, I suggest that my interactions with the *bhakats* of UKS have brought a number of important networking and touring opportunities, access to prestigious platforms, and several paid performances. As I demonstrate in Chapter Six, giving away time and information to foreign scholars is an active (though not necessarily self-conscious) method of creating social connections and networks which

can lead to non-economic benefits such as, as we saw in the Introduction, ‘the fact that others, even others one has never met, consider one’s name important, one’s actions significant’ (Graeber 2001:45). Seen in this way, my research can be seen as part of a more equitable exchange than the unidirectional flows of information critiqued in post-Malinowskian anthropology. This thesis thus enacts what Grau has referred to as a ‘dialectic of control’ in which neither party in the relationship is ever completely without agency (Grau 1999:168).

By remaining conscious of the traditions of unequal power relations that I have inherited, both as a European and, more actively, as an ethnographer, I have attempted at each stage of the research process to do whatever I can to deconstruct any myth of objectivity or universality of perspective.

iii. Compromised fieldwork?

The second potentially thorny area that needs to consideration is closely related to the third ‘defence’ against unequal power relations—that is the fact that I have engaged with the *bhakats* of this study not only as an ethnographer but also a producer and entrepreneur engaged in production and advocacy. I have been a paying dance student, I have engaged with advocacy on behalf of my principal informants, brought family, friends and paying tourists to visit the monastery and my husband and son to live there. I have also produced tours and become a friend. Understanding the networks and systems of referral that bring the ethnographer and informants together is in its self very revealing of patterns of power and representation. When I first came to Majuli Island in 2012, I travelled not as a scholar, but as an entrepreneur, on a recce for local music to show to Sound Travels’ clients. In the following section, I describe the route I took to UKS which followed pathways established by tourism³ and my on-going professional, personal and scholarly relationship with the *bhakats* of my study, in order to make explicit the various subject positions I hold in relation to my subject. I then consider how the circumstances which led to our encounter might have affected some of the outcomes of this research.

³ In Chapter Two I show how these pathways have been laid and explain that foreign researchers are often drawn to the same monastery in their pursuit of knowledge about Assamese Vaishnavism. I then demonstrate that this has led to the practices and doctrine of this monastery dominating popular narratives about Assamese Vaishnavism.

In 2010, I started a company called Sound Travels, which offers in-depth music-focused tours to small groups of travellers. I started operating tours in Rajasthan, with the support of Quo Vadis a Delhi-based company who do my ‘ground handling’ (hotel and transport bookings). In 2012, I suggested to Quo Vadis’ director Reet Hazarika, that I would like to start up musical tours in Assam. By coincidence, it turned out that Hazarika was from Assam (Hazarika is in fact a very common Assamese surname) and he was very enthusiastic. As well as agreeing to provide the advice and help I had asked for, he also offered to cover the entire costs of a research tour, including hotels, transport, accompanying guide and translator. I therefore travelled to Guwahati on 31st March 2012, where I was met by Kankan, a representative of Jungle Travels, Quo Vadis’ partner tour operator in the region. Jungle Travels had arranged for me to visit cultural centres in Guwahati, meet with stakeholders in the Assamese music scene and to see as much music as I possibly could in a ten-day tour of Assam. On the seventh day of the trip Kankan and I crossed the Brahmaputra by boat. At Kamalabari Ghat we met a local tour guide who took us to UKS. We were met at the gate by Govinda Kalita Bayan, who took us to his *boha*, served us tea and then demonstrated the *khol* and *nagara* drums and sang songs. Other members of the *boha* and other houses in the monastery drifted in and out. I had my harp with me—a small 22-string clarsach—so I joined in and passed a very pleasant few hours in their bare front room.

Over many years, this relationship has evolved and grown. Each year after my first visit, during the springtime festival of Bihu, I returned to the monastery with my husband, my son (who was born in December 2013) and small groups of tourists. In 2013, my mother was part of the group, and in 2014, my father came too. In 2014, I started the research for this PhD, and spent a year researching Assamese Vaishnavism and Indian performance practices more broadly, in UK libraries and online. In 2015, during the month of *bhadra* (August-September), my husband Som, son Robi-Jo and I stayed in the monastery guesthouse so that I could learn dances and songs from the *sattrā*, gain a better understanding of the dance practices cultivated within the *sattrā* and observe the ways in which they worked to mobilise their performance practices beyond the *sattrā*. I describe this period in more detail below in order to clarify my research methods. In February 2015, I took ten monks to perform in Bhutan, and in July 2016, I took eleven monks on a ten-day tour of the UK (explored in detail in Chapter Four). In January 2018, I travelled to Guwahati to speak at a conference and watch rehearsals and a performance of ‘International *bhaona*’—Assamese Vaishnavite dance-theatre—

performed by ten students from Brown University, US, which was organised by dancer and choreographer from UKS, Bhabananda Barbayan.

In my interactions with UKS, therefore, I have various and evolving roles, which all have a bearing on the nature of this study: musician, entrepreneur, research scholar, dance student and tour manager. The fact that my parents and close friends have joined my Sound Travels tours to UKS, and that I have usually been accompanied by Som and Robi-Jo, has also meant that the monks have got to know me as daughter, wife and mother. Some of the *bhakats*—Govinda, Jadumani, Niranjana and Bhabananda in particular—have become my friends.

Though our livelihoods are far from dependent on one another, I have engaged financially with the monks of UKS on eight occasions since 2013: I paid them for performing for the groups of tourists I brought to visit UKS for four consecutive years 2013–2016; I paid a fee to an individual from that monastery for assisting with the 2016 tour; I paid the troupe who travelled to Bhutan;⁴ I paid for my own dance lessons and accommodation in the monastery guesthouse in 2015 and I fundraised for the 2016 UK tour, for which they were paid a fee by the ICCR. I profited from each of these interactions as I earned a fee as a tour manager for the UK tour and from my Sound Travels tours. The conversations and complications surrounding these transactions gave me insights into the financial structure of the *sattrā*, and the evolving commercialisation of the *sattrā*'s performance practices, that a less 'involved' ethnographer perhaps would not have gained. As Hill and Bithell point out in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Revival* (2014), this dual academic and interventionist role is not an unusual one: 'As many of the contributing authors to *Transforming Tradition* were themselves participants in revival activities, they offer important insights into the role of scholars and public folklorists as revival agents' (Bithell and Hill 2014: 8). In many of the performances I analyse in this thesis—particularly in Chapter Five—I have actively contributed as a producer, and therefore my own aesthetics and politics must be taken in to account. Bithell and Hill argue that the 'involvement of scholars in revival processes and the changing intellectual trends that influences them' have been 'often underplayed' (5). In this account I keep my own role as transparent. In Chapter Four, for example, I describe how my desire to satisfy of ACE criteria for funding shaped the way I organised the tour for the *bhakats* of this study, which is the central focus of analysis in Chapter Five.

⁴ The Bhutan festival organisers defaulted on all payments, so I paid the monks from my own savings.

So does the fact that I am useful to my informants—and the specific nature of that usefulness—compromise my research? What unconscious bias might be latent in the work of an academic who has parallel interactions with her informants? What sorts of responses might be elicited by a potential employer and friend that might be different from those elicited from other types of ethnographer?

It is hard to find scholarship which explicitly critiques having financial and professional relationships with informants. On the contrary, I have found various examples of established anthropologists who describe financial interactions as being one of many elements of social interaction which needs to be negotiated ‘in the field’. Beaudry explains how she learnt on her first ethnographic expedition to the Arctic that her Inuit informants required ethnographers to pay for interviews and musical recordings:

I learned that I could not instruct people to work when and how I thought they should, even when I was paying them. In other words, even for money, my work was not a priority in their lives. (2008: 229)

My interviews have never been monetised as such, but have mostly taken place on the edges of paid-for activities, like tours, classes and touristic performances. So while performances and classes are explicitly commodified, conversations are not. In Bell’s account, the financial relationship is one of quasi-dependence: she becomes the local money lender:

This news of vast amounts of money at my disposal [on locals discovering the amount Bell received as a university stipend] was of greater interest to local men who lusted after second-hand vehicles, than to the women who were already into a pattern of borrowing money from me on the off-pay week and repaying it the next. They knew the extent of my resources and our ledgers were in the vicinity of \$20-\$30, not the thousands which the men sought. When I left the field, the unpaid loans were men’s. Women worked on a quick turn-around and sent me off with presents, so I was the one who was indebted (Bell 1993:35)

Bell’s regular interactions with the women who came to borrow or return money allowed her to have conversations and clear insights into their sense of economising (37). But her presence is a clearly interventionist—what would the women have done for cash had she not been there? She does not comment on it.

Musicians brought into contact with someone perceived to have prestige and connections are likely to see the ethnographer as someone potentially useful and thus might shape their interactions to make the best possible impression. Titon’s musician friends-cum-informants in Minnesota saw him as being ‘someone who might be able to

promote them, to help them with their careers,’ (Titon 2008: 26). Titon does not reflect on how this may have compromised the information they provide him in interviews, he only sees it as a way to make his intrusions and questions as an ethnographer more bearable and thus providing him better access to more information.

One way in which I see my initial arrival as an entrepreneur and tour operator affecting my research is that it had an impact on the sort of informants I first befriended. In UKS, my first encounter was with Govinda, the only *bhakat* from UKS who had established a relationship with the local tour guide who introduced us. Later, the *bhakats* who were the most keen to speak to and befriend me were Govinda’s friends and those who wanted to tour and promote their art forms beyond the monastery. These early acquaintances were, necessarily, the more outward-looking personalities of the *sattrā*. The second way in which my position as an entrepreneur might have impacted my research findings was that politeness and hospitality prevented anyone from openly criticising globalisation, touring and popularisation of monastic art forms in front of someone who seemed to be involved with these processes. Though I knew that many monks have expressed reservations—both privately and in monastery meetings—about foreign tours and the new ‘glamour’ attached to the mobilisation of monastic performance practices, these were never expressed in front of me. It would have been considered deeply inhospitable to imply to any foreigner, even one without the associations of promoter, that involvement of foreigners is unwanted.

Having these associations of usefulness attached to me also brought clear benefits. In a study about mobilisation, it was useful to be able to observe first-hand how certain members of the community wished to represent themselves to someone who might be of use. I was able to see that as a foreigner, I was considered a potential link to international mobility. Secondly, my position as an entrepreneur in the past and a tour manager in the 2016 tour gave me a clear working role amongst the performers. Beaudry describes the difficulty, at times, of explaining the presence and work of an ethnographer to the subjects of one’s study, and the potential for causing suspicion: ‘Friendship and camaraderie are tainted with the pragmatic uses that could be made of them.’ (Beaudry 2008: 245). Explaining my work was quite straightforward in an environment where the monks themselves were deeply involved in research—Bhabananda Barbayan has himself written a PhD—and the inhabitants at UKS have always responded openly and generously to my research questions, however, there is a

certain openness and camaraderie which comes when working together for a common cause.

Rather than asking whether research is compromised when an ethnographer is engaged financially with her informants, I started to wonder whether the question should really be: is there such a thing as an *uncompromised* ethnographer? As Kisliuk states: ‘the deeper our commitment in the field, the more our life stories intersect with our “subject’s,” until Self-Other boundaries are blurred’ (Kisliuk 2008:183). Is it more ethically sound to receive payment from an academic institution for your engagement with the informants you study than from tourists or cultural funders? I actually think not. Moreover, financial engagement is only one of many other forms of social interaction: what about gift exchange? Eating each other’s food, becoming friends, enemies? The artists I worked with, in particular, were keen to perform and be paid to perform, so the more opportunities I could bring, the more valuable a presence I became. In this way, rather than being compromised by my financial interactions with my informants, the research became more mutually satisfying and therefore produced fuller, more extensive material.

iv. Embodied ethnography and kinaesthetic knowledge

I moved into the guesthouse at UKS in the summer of 2015 with the intention of observing the lives and performance practices of the monks who lived there, as part of my doctoral research. I was not sure, at that point, if I would be able to learn the dance. I knew that gaining some level of competence in the dance being studied was an important way to be able to ask the right questions and fully experience, rather than just watch or read about, a performance practice. Margaret Walker describes how learning kathak helped her to ask the right questions when talking to other dancers, and helped her read about the dance, because she had felt it with her own body:

I was able to gain a kinaesthetic knowledge of kathak that informed both my bibliographic and ethnographic research. This embodied understanding obviously played a role in my interviews and conversations with other dancers, but also provided me with a level of physical insight that has been useful in my investigation of eighteenth and nineteenth-century treatises, iconography and travel writings. (Walker 2014a: 6)

Within dance studies, various ethical and methodological concerns have been raised about learning dance as a way to study it. Kaeppler worries that cultural bias and

learned habits will creep in to the ethnographer-dancer's style (Kaepler 1999:18) Van Zile raises the question of competence:

[I]t is easy to become so engrossed in one's own effort to master the movement that important cues (such as comments from a teacher to another student) may be overlooked. It is also possible that since one is an outsider to the tradition being studied [...], inaccurate performance of the movements will be accepted, while they would not be if performed by insiders. (Van Zile 1999:91-92)

My own reservation was firstly ethical: over the four years I had worked with the monks, I had come to understand—from the monks' own explanations and in some of the scholarly, touristic and devotional literature discussed above—that their dances were sacred. Dance was performed in the *namghar* as a form of worship, or as part of devotional plays and had been invented by the deified founder-guru Sankaradeva. If these dances were acts of prayer, I could not assume I would be allowed to learn them.

Ann R. David, in her discussion of 'embodied ethnography,' whilst agreeing with 'Ethnomusicology's insistence on participation through performing' (David: 2013: 53) acknowledges her privileged position as a non-Hindu ethnographer who is permitted, indeed encouraged, to participate in practices which are 'much sought after by the devotees present' (ibid.). David also explores how, in 'a situation where participatory performance is not allowed (as a lay, non-Buddhist woman), one might still try to find, and possibly experience that 'interior' embodied knowledge' (David 2013: 57).⁵ Though the discipline of ethnomusicology might encourage, even insist upon, participation as a primary research method, I could not assume that my 'ethnographic subjects' would welcome it. And if they did, in a situation where the researcher exercises power over the subjects of her study (in the form of financial, cultural or social capital, for example), would it be ethical to knowingly exercise it? Was it enough that I, as participant-observer simply acknowledged my own power over my subjects, or should I refuse, regardless of the pressures of both the discipline and, as in David's case study, the encouragement of the hosts? The priorities and methods of western-style ethnography might not be those of Assamese monks and, even if they were (I knew, by this stage, that several of the monks were pursuing cultural studies in higher education institutes), they might feel they were better placed to speak for themselves than I, a temporary student of their dance form.

⁵ David resolves this by filming the dancing and learning it from the video.

The second concern I had was physical: I had seen the *bhakats* were extremely agile and had read that a series of yogic exercises known as *mati akhara*⁶—ranging from the very simple to the extremely acrobatic—‘form the basic vocabulary of the dances’ (J Goswami and Kothari 2013: 52; A Mahanta 2011: 2). Would I advance to learning the dance, or would the two months be spent getting my body into the right shape to master this yogic ‘vocabulary’?

The third reservation was to do with gender. Until now, I had only seen male monks dancing inside the *sattrā*. Although I was aware that an increasing number of middle class girls and women were learning ‘Sattriya’ in non-monastic settings, I was unsure how the monks felt about this development. I was also concerned that, even if they did not mind teaching me their dances, it might prevent them from speaking openly about appropriation from non-monastic dancers, which was something I was particularly interested in.

Many of these concerns were dispelled in the first two days of being in the monastery, where I discovered that a system and setting were already in place for foreign scholars like me. I would learn, but in an auditorium, not inside the *namghar* and in private lessons; not with other training *bhakat* or in any ritual or devotional context. The evening we arrived in Majuli, Govinda invited me to a formal meeting in his *boha* (the home he shares with his monastic family) with the president and secretary of the *sattrā*’s ‘committee’ which was responsible for any non-religious matters concerning the members of UKS. In this meeting, we would formally agree the terms of my stay and system of payments. All of the conversation was addressed to my husband Som in Assamese, who translated for me. Before I could broach the subject, Govinda told Som that in two months he would be able to teach me a 15-minute dance. I would meet Govinda in the auditorium each day to learn dance from 9-11am and singing from 7-8pm. There would be no days off, not even Sundays, unless Govinda got called away with activities relating to the *sattrā* (which he was for only six days in the two months we stayed on the island). I would pay Govinda directly for the teaching; payments for use of the auditorium and guesthouse would go to the committee. I was asked to provide the committee with a signed declaration of my intent whilst staying in the monastery, which I duly produced a few days later.

The following morning, I found Govinda sweeping the floor of the auditorium. I removed my shoes, entered the room and he started the lesson. In that first lesson,

⁶ This translates as ‘ground exercise’ See Chapter Six, p. 205.

Govinda taught me five, un-challenging *mati akhara* sequences. I learned to move between the five positions to the accompaniment of a fixed set of spoken mnemonic syllables, or ‘*bol*’, that Govinda and I would chant together, for example:

Tha dina dheni dao

Tata kita kiti taki dao (x2)

After that, I did not learn anything else that Govinda explicitly referred to as *mati akhara*.⁷ In the second lesson, I began to learn a dance that Govinda called *cali nach*. Each lesson was spent learning dance moves, writing down and then memorising the corresponding sections of *bol* and discussing a variety of topics related to the functioning of the *sattrā* and Govinda’s life and work. In the evening singing lessons I learned a song in praise of Krishna, with corresponding hand movements called *hastas*, which became incorporated into the dance.

The process of learning *sattriya* led to two crucial outcomes in this research. Firstly, I was given a clear message about the relationship between the *bhakats* of the monastery and the new, female-orientated ‘classicised’ form of dance: they approved of it, they choreographed dances in that idiom and they had a system in place to accommodate it, albeit just outside the monastery gates. Secondly, it shattered the myth of continuity. From what I had read and heard so far, I understood that that the monastic repertoire had been passed down orally since the time of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Various accounts agree that *cali nach* was invented by Sankaradeva’s principal devotee, the sixteenth-century poet-saint Madhavadeva (P J Mahanta 2013: 29; 35; Barbayan 2016: 77). Often, the saints’ role in the creation of the repertoire is interchangeable. Madhavadeva is sometimes credited with having expanded and innovated upon Sankaradeva’s original works. Whether Sankaradeva or Madhavadeva was considered the original ‘author’ of this dance, given these descriptions, I imagined that the dance I was learning was understood as having passed down over generations since the fifteenth-century. But early on in the learning process, my perception changed. At around my fifth lesson, I found that one of the sequences left the weight on the same foot I would have to use to start the next sequence. It would need a quick shuffle or hop to correct it. Govinda thought for a moment and then made a small change: I could start

⁷ When I asked Govinda about this at the end of the six weeks, he said that many of the positions and movements that made up the dance I had learnt were in fact recognised as *mati akhara*.

the next sequence on the other foot, he decided. A few days later, he made another small change, deciding to repeat a short sequence four times instead of six.

Realising that the dances were considered malleable after all and not to be strictly preserved exactly as before, I asked Govinda again who had choreographed it. Just how much of what I was learning was considered to be directly part of a ‘tradition’, and how much was ‘new’. He answered:

The *bol*, Sankardev, he wrote them. This first performed was in Barpeta. He makes 12 *cali nach*, 4 *jhumura* dances, some *nadubhangi*, there are dances for Krishna, for the *sutradahr* [narrator]. The first two have has the same three-part structure: *ramdani-geetor-mela*; the last only *ramdani-geetor*. But you won’t see *abhinaya* in our monastery.

The first three statements conform roughly with narratives I had heard before, but in the last statement, he made explicit for the first time that there was a difference between what I was learning and the formal notion of *cali nach*. I asked Govinda why this version contained *abhinaya* sections, if that was not strictly part of a *cali nach* and Govinda answered:

Not only me, all monks, many people decide. I go to France, thinking, writing, this will go inside, this will not go.⁸ Sankaradeva writing ‘Hey Krishna’ – I keep it inside. In Bharatnatyam, no pure dance, only *abhinaya*. Temple dance is different – only prayer; it’s God. No people coming. They will be bored. Auditorium dance, many people see. These people don’t like temple dance.⁹

Through his explanation, Govinda made it clear that the dance he taught me had collective authorship.

Both the physical cues offered by learning the dance, and the questions and conversations that arose naturally out of the learning process helped me to understand the relationship between the version of dance practiced in the *namghar* and that which has been developed for the procenium stage. I discuss this process in detail in Chapter Three, but here it is important to point out that the genesis of many important research observations came from dance lessons.

⁸ Govinda has made a number of trips to France, along with Bhabananda Barbayan and varying numbers of monastic colleagues, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. Here Govinda refers to a residency that a group of *bhakats* undertook in 2008 in l’Abbaye de Sylvanes, where they worked to create ‘stage-ready’ dance pieces for the French tour.

⁹ This quotation is noted in my fieldnote diary shortly after my lesson on 21st August, 2016.

Gaining embodied knowledge of a dance helped me to watch and analyse dance performances. I was able to appreciate the agility, strength and balance required to dance *sattriya* far better having started training in the form myself. But most significantly, for this study, I had entered into a setting in which the dance was in the process of mobilisation—from Govinda’s memory to my body—from a man to a woman; a local to a foreigner. To participate in the very act that interested in me—the mobilisation of a dance—was to have crucial implications for the insights in the following chapters.

v. Woman; mother; wife – gender in the field

In an ethnography which prioritises ‘embodied’ research, it is of course important to consider what sort of ‘body’ is taking part. I have already commented on the implications of my whiteness and foreignness—but what of my gender? A growing scholarship considers the tensions and possibilities inherent in a woman ‘doing’ ethnography. Three important discussions of theory on ‘gender in the field’ are Golde 1970; and Whitehead and Conaway 1986; Cassell 1987; and Bell et al. 1993. As Bell points out, these considerations have been expressed in women’s fieldnotes and anthropological accounts long before the advent of the ‘postmodern turn’ of the late 80s (Bell 1993:7). Though many of the themes that are discussed in these collections resonate with my own experiences, it would be unwise, as Babiracki argues, to make a causal link between being a woman and achieving certain outcomes (2008: 167). It seems *likely* that a woman like Schrijvers (1993: 151; Bell 1993:30) might gain better access to personal confessions about motherhood than a male ethnographer would, for example, but we can never be sure, given that each ethnographic encounter is so unique and so compromised by myriad other factors beyond gender. Daves Soneji, a male ethnographer looking at the origins of Bharatnatyam, demonstrates astonishing access to female communities, and references extremely frank and personal conversations which—in an argument which privileges same-sex ethnography—might not be expected from interactions with a male ethnographer (Peterson and Soneji 2008; Soneji 2012). In my own case, it is impossible to state with any certainty which of my interactions might have been affected by my gender. It might be argued that the fact that I learnt the ‘stagable’ form of *sattr* arts, often performed by women, was because of my gender. However, I know that a male Mexican dancer came to the monastery and was taught in the auditorium in the same way that I was, and many of the *bhakats* learn that style for

performances on the proscenium stage—so I consider my restriction to the auditorium as being related more to my position as non-*bhakat*, than my gender.

Babiracki cites the advice given to her as a young student, by the anthropologist Edward Ives:

About setting up the initial interview, [Ives] said, ‘There are two questions that students often ask at about this point. The first, and by far the more common, frequently comes out something like this: ‘Do you think it’s going to make a difference that I’m a girl when I go talk to Mr. Bilodeau about lumbering?’ My answer is usually, ‘Of course it’s going to make a difference, but I can’t tell you what kind of difference.’’ Ives goes on to say a bit later, ‘Just about every time I have predicted how the man/woman of it would work out in some particular case, I have been wrong, which means that I have stopped predicting’. (Babiracki 2008: 121).

Before embarking on my fieldwork, I had received some unofficial warnings about working closely with male dance teachers, based on negative fieldwork experiences of academic advisors. These resonated with previous experiences I had had in other settings in India working with some male musicians, so I took them on board. However, as Ives suggests, it is hard to know how the ‘man/woman of it’ would play out. In fact I have never felt so comfortable in all-male company as I felt in UKS. Indeed, many of the conventional divisions which usually divide ‘man’ and ‘woman’ subject positions were actually quite irrelevant in the context of my field research. As celibates (*udasin* in Assamese, translates more closely as ‘renunciate’, indicating an avoidance of all worldly concerns, not only sex) they live outside the constraints of mainstream Indian patriarchy. It is interesting that, in an environment where women are excluded institutionally, I was welcomed so warmly and on such equal terms. I was certainly never objectified or made to feel ‘other’ in any subtle or unsubtle way. Could it be that, living in an environment where they do not witness the daily subordination of women, the *bhakats* have a better opportunity to develop a mode of interaction with women beyond normative roles ascribed in wider society? *Bhakats* perform all the roles, and exude many of the traits which, in Western culture and in mainstream Indian culture, are traditionally associated with femininity. They cook and clean, they care for and bring up their ‘sons’¹⁰. They wear their hair long but they are clean shaven, and they train their movements to be graceful and gentle. When they dance, they are often taking on the persona of *gopis*, Krishnas female consorts. Therefore, despite my description of their company as ‘all-male’, it is hard to draw a clear gender divide between them and

¹⁰ In Chapter Two I discuss the way that the *sattras* are organised, and how young *bhakats* are adopted into their new monastic ‘families’.

myself. I too cook, clean and bring up a son. I too wear my hair long (and have a relatively hairless face). As a child I was taught, in gender normative fashion of mainstream western culture, to dance, to carry myself ‘well’ and to be gracious and hospitable to guests. Many of the stereotyped divisions between male and female simply were not relevant, at least when I was alone in the monastery. Having observed the interactions with other European visiting friends and scholars, I feel that my status as a foreigner, an outsider to the monastery, and my relative wealth were as significant in organising my relationship with the *bhakats* of UKS, as my gender. When I returned to Majuli in 2015 to live in the monastery guesthouse, however, I came with my husband and my son. In the presence of my husband, who is Indian, the *bhakats*’ conduct towards me did change, but again, it is hard to say whether this was on account of my gender or my being a cultural outsider.

Because my husband is an academic whose research also focuses on Assam, and my research year coincided with his two-term sabbatical, we were able to travel as a family to Majuli Island, and stay for two months. Som, who speaks fluent Assamese, took responsibility for setting up and running our household, which consisted of two large rooms at the front of the monastery guesthouse, and use of a nominally communal kitchen, which only we used. We employed and managed a cleaner (Gulabi), and a cook (Nobbo) bought groceries from the monastery shop, where we had an account, and cycled to town to buy anything the shop could not provide. There was no fridge in our kitchen, so Som organised a daily delivery of fresh milk straight from Nobbo’s cow and live fish from the fish monger. He also looked after Robi-Jo for two hours every morning, during my dance lessons, and one hour each evening, during my singing lessons and some interview sessions. The rest of the time Robi-Jo was with me as I conducted more informal research. If I am to draw attention to the potential restrictions of being a female, and mother in the field, it is equally important to show that the presence of my partner off-set a lot of the strain. As Schrijvers points out, ‘Sharing responsibility obviously facilitated acceptance of the more troublesome aspects of ‘mothering in the field’’ (1992:148).

Som frequently acted as translator in my interviews and any inhibitions felt by my informants about speaking to me in his presence were more than compensated for by the anecdotes and details he picked up as a native Assamese speaker. As an Assamese-speaking Bengali, Som represented a very familiar figure to my *bhakat* informants which coupled with a long experience in interviewing as a journalist in India for many

years, and latterly as an academic researcher, put informants at ease, and helped me to tease out important nuances in what they were saying. In Bell's reflections on the new phenomenon of the 'field-husband', she is not convinced that this role will be parallel to that of the earlier category of 'field-wife':

[I]t is now more likely that women anthropologists will be accompanied by a non-anthropological husband. One wonders whether eventually there will be another ethnographic sub-genre consisting of the reflections of the 'field-husband', although it is doubtful that his profile will be in accord with Mead's (1986: 326-7) sketch of anthropological endogamy and the 'complete intellectual obliteration, selfless typing, proof-reading and making of bibliographies of the working wife [...] (Bell et al. 1993: 9)

Later in the same volume, however, Vera-Sanso describes a situation in which her husband, who had travel to visit her 'in the field' as a holiday, 'eventually took notes for all the interviews he attended.' (Versa-Sanso 1993:164). Similarly, whilst Som, to my mind, never suffered 'intellectual obliteration', he did partake in house management, daiper changing and translation.

Pitfalls of 'mothering in the field'

There were certain aspects of our self-sufficiency as a household and timetable based on Robi-Jo's needs and clearly demarcated childcare sharing that I initially thought might restrict my research potential during my stay on Majuli Island. Certainly, before I left, I had been warned by friends and family about the potential pitfalls of going to Assam with such a small child (he was twenty months when we arrived). Schrijvers points out a similar social resistance to her plans to travel to Sri Lanka to undertake field work with two small children:

Not only neighbours and relatives but also female colleagues expressed their doubts. I remember most vividly the warnings of a colleague of my own age who was also a mother of two sons: "I doubt whether you will be able to do you work. What if they fall seriously ill? Personally I would not take such as risk." (Schrijvers 1993: 145)

My 'advisory network' were not so overt about depicting India as a disease-ridden threat to children's health, and the NHS doctor I consulted before I left was encouraging. However, I was certainly warned by academic colleagues about the need for flexibility and availability in conducting fieldwork, and the desirability of 'immersion' which might be difficult with a small child, and the context of a nuclear family unit.

Indeed, when in Majuli, our child care routine did mean that my visits across the lane to the monastery were limited to certain times of day and for specific purposes. I inferred from conversations with Govinda that other women who had come to UKS as tourists and dance students had spent far more time inside the monastery. Rebecca, a young French woman who had come to learn to dance and stayed with a local family as a paying guest, and Édith, a music promoter from France who stayed in the guesthouse, spent from dawn until dusk inside the monastery and ate all their meals there. Govinda walked them back to their respective accommodation each night. Had I been alone, and therefore attracted more assistance from the *bhakats*, I may have been able to learn more about the everyday activities of the *sattrā* through incidental observation, and I could have adhered less strictly to my own focus on ‘outward facing’ and ‘globalising’ practices.

As it was, for example, I never went to observe the early morning *namghar* rehearsals of the young monks preparing for a *bhaona* production which would take place in early September, both because this did not work with our family morning routine, it did not seem important to my research at the time, and I knew I would witness the final performance. In retrospect, I realised I had missed a valuable opportunity for witnessing the way that the *adhiyapaks*, monastic dance and music teachers, taught young children. What is more, I found that the monks were inhibited to speak to me in Som’s presence and were disinclined to speak the mixture of English and Hindi we usually communicated in in front of someone bilingual. This could have been because they were embarrassed to speak broken “Hinglish” in the presence of a bilingual and also perhaps because of a sense of impropriety at speaking directly to someone else’s wife. In which ever case, as soon as Som appeared, all conversations, plans and invitations went through him.

Opportunities of ‘mothering in the field’

Robi-Jo was an unexpectedly important facilitating presence during my fieldwork research. In my dance lessons, as I describe in Chapter Three, I was taught a re-worked, ‘classicised’ arrangement of the monastic performance practices, which was useful in gaining an insight into the ways the repertoire has been reworked for women, but the way Robi-Jo picked up dance steps was far closer to the way young *bhakats* learned.

I was taught five *mati akhara* sequences¹¹ and a dance which was broken down into small sections which I built up gradually over several weeks. Som brought Robi-Jo in to the auditorium at the end of my dance lessons, and he would run around and play while I was finishing my rehearsal. On one of these occasions, Robi-Jo started copying me, and within a few sessions could mimic the entire dance, without ever having been actively taught. Govinda would encourage Robi-Jo to dance in front of other monks, by playing *khol* cycles which Robi had come to recognise as accompanying certain moves, and saying ‘Robi-Jo dance!’. Each afternoon at around 4pm, we would go to the monastery as a family and sit around drinking tea and chatting while Robi-Jo played with monks of all ages. Frequently, this playing involved dance and *mati akhara*: the young monks would demonstrate what they knew and older monks would encourage Robi-Jo to join in. They would manipulate his body into various floor-based *mati akhara* positions which require a highly flexible body. During my dance lessons, which were modelled around institutionalised dance instruction, I was never required to lie on the floor or be touched by my teacher. Robi-Jo’s presence allowed me to observe in a natural fashion many of the ways in which dance and movement is learnt by the young monks through observation and play. The presence of a pre-language infant, unhindered by physical self-consciousness, also helped me observe important aspects of monastic teaching, nurturing and play that I would not have witnessed alone. It also allowed me to spend much longer in the presence of and in non-verbal communication with monks than might have been appropriate if I was alone. The role of my husband and son in both enabling and restricting my research, as well as taking it in new directions, should be acknowledged as I proceed with this thesis.

Because I was sometimes performing the subject position of ‘wife’, people sometimes addressed my husband rather than me, but Som’s presence facilitated a quality of research which I could not have conducted as a non-Assamese-speaking female researching alone. As a ‘woman’ I was certainly marked as an outsider to the monastic brotherhood, but then, so is everyone else. Moreover, as a woman I was taught in the ‘academy’ manner, as taught in dance schools around Assam and was therefore able to gain an embodied knowledge of a new dance style. As a mother, I was not available all the time to see all the late-night events, but, accompanied by an infant, was able to spend much longer in the company of my *bhakat* informants during the daytime.

¹¹ Literally ‘Ground Exercises’, *mati akhara* are yogic positions and dance sequences which have been recently framed as the ‘building blocks’ of the Sattriya dance repertoire. See Chapter Six, p. 205 for further details.

I was also able to observe my son learning through hands-on manipulation, copying, competition and play, in a way far more akin to the *sattrā* modes of learning which takes place informally, occasionally, and often away from an outsiders' gaze. Being a 'wife', a 'woman' and a 'mother' in UKS certainly effected the way that I learned, saw and lived while undertaking my fieldwork but in unpredictable ways.

Dance on the Move: Literature Review

As well being informed by ethnographic research, the way that I think and talk about the mobilisation of dance is indebted to three principal areas of enquiry: the first is the scholarship around national musical and dance revivals, particularly of dance.

Revivalist scholarship helps to think about the processes and changing meanings involved as cultural forms are mobilised between different classes and communities; between urban and rural spaces; from the past to the present; from the local to the national; from the town square to the concert stage; from gift to commodity and back again. Revivalist literature, in particular discussions of dance and music revivals in the 1930s and 1940s in India, is of particular pertinence in Chapter Three, which discusses the revivalist activities that have led to the new genre of Sattriya emerging from the *sattrā* performance repertoire. However, revivalist scholarship, in dealing with such a wide range of cultural mobility also informs my later discussions of international touring culture, workshops and interactions with foreign tourists. The second area of enquiry which considers the questions of the mobility of dance is Tourism Studies, which considers the commodification and packaging of 'culture' for consumption by foreign leisure travellers. This literature is of particular use in considering the short- and long-term interactions between foreign learners of Sattriya dance while travelling, holidaying or studying in India, in Chapter Six. It also informs discussions of an inverted encounters between audiences and 'others': the foreign dance tour, where not the leisured traveller, but the dancers themselves, are on the move, which form the focus of Chapters Four and Five. The third area of scholarship that helps to think through the mobilisation of dance are the studies of globalised dance practices, such as salsa, ballet and bhangra: dance styles which exist in places and spaces beyond their place of origin. Each of these three areas helps to create an understanding of dance on the move: through space, time and society. In the following sections, I will provide a brief overview of the literature on each subject, and suggest where my thesis contributes something new.

i. Performing Arts and the Nation

A growing number of scholars are interested in the mobilisation of performance practices in relation to building and maintaining national identities, and this scholarship provides a useful backdrop to understanding the actions the *bhakats* of my study took in order to make their performance practices have value at a national level. In this section, I provide an overview of the literature pertaining to national revivals of performance practices in Europe, post-colonial contexts and India in particular. I then consider the insights from this literature that will be of use in this discussion of the mobilisation of dance by the *bhakats* of Assam, as well as the problems and potential limitations of a national-revivalist perspective.

Constantly reaffirming a ‘national’ consciousness as well as the institutionalisation of culture through a nation-state apparatus involves projects of re-staging, re-shaping and giving performance practices new meanings within new hierarchies. This process has been considered by scholars in relation to the ‘old’ European nations, particularly coming out of the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century ‘promulgated by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803)—with its belief that folk poetry and customs reflect the soul of the nation [often referred to in English-language scholarship using the German word ‘Volkgeist’].’ (Bithell and Hill 2014:6). Applegate and Potter emphasise the link between music and ‘national consciousness’ in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century:

German national consciousness began in such circles [of readers and writers for whom print had become the essential means of communication], emerging from discussions about developing a unity of taste and judgement on literary matters and eventually spilling over into musical matters (Applegate and Potter 2002:3)

Before this nascent literati interpolated music into a ‘national’ space, ‘the composers and musicians of the eighteenth century practiced their art mainly within the confines of either the court or the town.’ (ibid.:3) Young’s Spanish case study demonstrates that the musical theatre form of *zarzuela* was instrumental in nation-building through a process of re-positioning localised art forms: ‘a *zarzuela* performance set in Madrid could incorporate forms of music and folk dancing native to areas of the country as far distant as Andalucía and Catalonia’ (2016: 4). Examples abound of art forms which were practiced by a small localised community becoming symbolic of an entire nation (for example Flamenco becoming symbolic of Spain) and of recontextualisations, such as

the *verbunkos*—developed in the eighteenth century to recruit conscripts becoming the ‘musical symbol of Hungary’ (Tari 2012:81).

As well as the interpolation of musical practice during the birth of new national projects, national governments are also involved with the continued maintenance and shaping of performing art forms, providing financial support (see Brennan et al. 2019: 95-98), enforcing law and order and policing the ways in which music and dance are performed, consumed and tolerated (see for example Casserly 2014 on the Northern Irish context; Hill 2003 on the clash between Thatcherism and Acid House parties in Britain; Brennan et al 2019: 80-82 on the Isle of Wight County Council Act 1971 preventing large overnight open-air gatherings without a licence). Throughout this literature, it is possible to see performing arts being simultaneously enabled, shaped and restricted in relation to notions of nation. How, when and where people dance and make music, how much noise they make and how many narcotics they take are under the purview of the nation state.

The mobilisation of performance practices during the creation of post-colonial and ex-Soviet nations has also engendered a burgeoning scholarship. On the context of music and performance in the construction of a nationalist identity in Senegal, see Kringelbach (2014) and in Tanzania see Askew (2002), in Georgia see Bithell (2014), in Uzbekistan see Merchant (2014), in Sri Lanka see Reed (2002), for Iran see Nooshin (2014), Shay (2002) and Meftahi (2007), and in Mexico see Nájera-Ramírez (1994) to name a few examples. In each of these very different contexts, even as notions of national sovereignty and identity draw inspiration from the European models, the new nation builders use music to disengage themselves from their colonial pasts:

Postcolonial elites sought to legitimize their power, and imagine a future for the new nation. This was done in large part by creating the illusion of continuity between the pre-colonial past and the present. (Kringelbach 2014:229)

These processes of re-imagining and organising of performing arts in the creation of modern nation of India (which achieved independence from the British in 1947), is of particular interest here, so I will now focus on the Indian context of national revival of performance practices.

a) Performing Arts and the Indian Nation

In her study of the nationally recognised classical dance form Kathak, Margaret Walker summarises some of the most influential studies:

Works on the revival of music and dance [in India] including dissertations (such as those by Meduri 1996, Kobayashi 2003, Neuman 2004 and Putcha 2011), collections of essays (for example Peterson and Soneji 2008) and work focusing on genres (Allen 1997, O'Shea 2006, Weidman 2006, du Perron 2007, Chakravorty 2008 and Soneji 2012 among others) or individual pioneers (Das Gupta 2003, Bakhle 2005, and Kippen 2006) have vigorously engaged with issues of artistic reconstruction and the nationalist agenda. (Walker 2014a: 110).

This mostly historical work considering the nature of the musical and dance revivals which accompanied the formulation of the new Indian nation helps to understand the discourses and processes of the national institutions performing arts must today navigate for national and international visibility. This in turn helps to contextualise some of the ways that the *bhakats* of this study choreograph and re-contextual their performance practices when they want to achieve recognition at a national level. The particular discourses which concerned India's nation builders became institutionalised in those national bodies which continue to bestow recognition on Indian performance practices today, namely, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (founded 1952) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (founded in 1950). The way in which these discourses became manifest in the nationally recognised dance form 'Sattriya', based on the performance practices of Assam's monasteries, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

One of the major interventions made by the recent scholarship around Indian national dance forms has been to highlight the fact that many of the claims to a 'temple' or 'spiritual' origin for major Indian Art Forms are spurious, and were motivated by a desire of the early nationalists to project an Indian heritage linked directly to an ancient Hindu spiritual past. Such mythic histories are intended to leap-frog the influence of British and Mughal culture, wrought over four hundred years of colonial presence. Work on Kathak by Walker (2014a; 2014b) and Bharatnatyam by Allen (1997), Chakravorty (2008) and Soneji (2012) on Bharatnatyam, in particular, have problematised popular narratives which speak of the dances as having a purely spiritual lineage. For example, as Walker tells us:

A crucial feature of [Kathak's] history in the twentieth century is the creation of connections to 'mythic ritual performance' in the minds of both practitioners and scholars (Walker 2014a: 6).

In the case of Bharatnatyam, we are persuaded that the dance form came from the practice of *devadasis* dancing for deities in temples; in the case of Kathak, that a community of '*kathaks*' wandered from village to village telling stories from the Mahabharata. These practices were corrupted and misappropriated by Mughals for their

own pleasure, and then being ‘saved’ by morally superior upper class practitioners and restored to their original purity (and, in the process, adapted for the modern concert stage).

Recent revisionist histories, looking beyond nationalist narratives, have found that any connectivity with ancient Hindu practice were constructed during a period of great excitement and possibility (as well as great violence and rupture) from the 1930s to 1950s when the new nation was able to re-imagine itself, and its performing arts practices became one arena in which to enact that re-imagination. A plethora of musical practices relating to spirituality and religion exist in India, but, as these scholars of postcolonial India demonstrated, the most significant musical national symbols (such as India’s classical dances and the Hindustani classical music and vocal traditions of the north, and Carnatic from the south) have evolved from performance forms with variegated lineages and owe a lot to patronage from the court. As Walker argues,

The synthesis of male and female practices, Muslim and Hindu contexts, and devotional and secular material into a single dance called kathak was a product of the cultural revival that dominated the arts during the first half of the twentieth century (Walker 2014a:8)

She provides convincing evidence that the dance we now know as Kathak has choreographic roots in performance practices developed in and patronised by the courts of the first Mughal Emperor Akbar (2014a:43-48). Similarly, Soneji presents detailed ethnographic and historical evidence for the relationship between the Tangore court and the dance practices which became known as Bharatnatyam (Peterson and Soneji 2008; Soneji 2012). In this thesis, particularly in Chapter Three, I employ the analytical tools and insights produced by this rich literature on the myriad revivals of Indian art forms, allowing me to historicise notions of ‘beautiful’ and ‘classical’ institutionalised at a national level, impacting the way that *sattriya* arts have been valued and written about and utilised by the *bhakats* of Assam to mobilise their artforms on a national stage. These insights also inspire an investigation of choreographic roots which goes beyond the linear inheritance narrative propagated in most accounts of Sattriya. By understanding the simultaneous processes of re-construction and denial of origins in other revival narratives, I approached *sattriya* arts from a critical perspective which allowed me to perceive the hints of Buddhist, *devadasi* and non-Vaishnavite Assamese influences effaced in dominant narratives.

Though these studies and insights on national revivals provide an important backdrop to the mobilisation of *sattriya* art forms on the national stage, there are certain

limitations. Considering the activities from the perspective of nationalist revival risks overemphasising the interventions of non-performers, and privileging the nationalist perspective. The scholarship on India's revivals has often represented the 'original practitioners' of revived practices as victims, and there are no examples in the scholarly literature of viable alternative systems of performance practice today lying outside the control of the dominant nation-state discourses and in the hands of the original holders. Because the focus of these studies is on the centralisation of culture, and the value of arts for modern urban elites, an overemphasis of the 'revivalist' perspective can take us away from the perspective of the original custodians of a culture. As a result of this, few of these studies consider the creative work that actually goes in to re-creating new dances for new purposes. This thesis is unusual in that it makes a close comparative reading of a 'pre-revival' and 'post-revival' dance to show the physical changes wrought by re-contextualisation, and thus foregrounds the artists who actively and consciously choreograph these changes.

In the following section, I consider the possibilities and potential problems posed by considering *sattriya* performance practices in relation to the notion of 'revival'. I also suggest that engaging the notion on certain terms, particularly those suggested by Ronström (2014) and Shay (2002; 2014), can prove useful—and can provide make an innovative contribution to scholarship on Indian performance revivals.

b) The Notion of 'Revival'

The term 'revival' is seen as irrelevant, even offensive, to monastic practitioners who have been taught their repertoire by monastic *adhiyapaks* (teachers) and see themselves as the inheritors of a sustained tradition of dynamic artistic endeavour. In an interview in 2016, Bhabananda Barbayan complained to me: 'people write about 'revival' but these are traditional dances that we've been practising in the monasteries for five hundred years.'¹² Prominent writer and performer Mallika Kandali describes Sattriya as 'the only living classical dance tradition of India,'¹³ implicitly distinguishing it from Odissi, Bharatnatyam and Kathak which are often represented as having disappeared, or passing through a period of degeneracy, before their recent popularity. By arguing that Sattriya is not a 'revived' form, Kandali and Barbayan perform three tasks. Firstly, they demonstrate Sattriya's particularity: Assam's classical dance is more 'authentic' than

¹² Conversation at UKS, Assam, 29th August, 2016.

¹³ See for example certindia.gov.in/sattriya.php last accessed 9th September 2018.

those of the other states, because it positioned as an ancient, rather than recently invented, tradition. Secondly, it demonstrates its non-derivative nature: it implies Sattriya cannot have been influenced by the dances of other states, because it is at least as old as they are. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it asserts a direct link between Sattriya and the dances invented by the founder saints of Assamese Vaishnavism: Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, thereby demonstrating, as Hobsbawm put it, the ‘sanction of precedent’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). ‘Revival’ implies rupture, whereas, no difference is acknowledged between Sattriya dance and its artistic and spiritual antecedents. In Ronström’s words ‘A historically grounded continuity is a prerequisite for authenticity, a quality mark that creates legitimation.’ (Ronström 2014:45). Revivals hide their workings in order to achieve this authenticity.

Bithell and Hill acknowledge the limitation of the term in its ‘literal sense of “resuscitation” or “resurrection”’ and quote Slobin’s similar objections to the term (2014: 4). As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, revivalist representations can themselves force a narrative of decline on art forms which are thriving elsewhere, which justifies outsider intervention, but also denies the contribution of contemporary practitioners. I do not wish to reinforce such a narrative by using the term ‘revival’.

However, the term can provide useful ways of exploring the repositioning of *sattria* arts and the activities of its practitioners in the modern globalised economy without presupposing decline. Scholars have expanded the term and applied it to a wide variety of musical contexts, some of which ‘may not have been defined in emic terms as revival movements,’ (Bithell and Hill 2014: 9) but which are usefully examined as such because they engage with comparable discourses and activities. As Bithell and Hill put it, they ‘share a fundamental motivation to draw upon the past and/or to intensify some aspect of the present’ (5).

Of particular relevance in relation to the *Sattriya* story is Ronström’s definition, which circumvents any suggestion of a ‘period of decline,’ and opens the term up widely:

Revivals are productions whereby things, actions, or ideas are actively brought from one context to another to make them accessible to new actors, in new places and times. (Ronström 2014: 44)

Used in this broader sense, the term provides a useful lens through which to consider the various ways in which *sattria* arts have been reshaped, re-contextualised and re-invigorated both by *bhakats* and urban elites, academics and middle class practitioners,

whilst stressing that, even when these processes began, *sattriya* arts were neither dying nor dead.

Noting the same tensions as Ronström, Shay developed a notion of ‘parallel traditions’ (in Shay 2002 and 2014) to help emphasise that whilst important developments might be happening to a musical form in certain contexts, other realities are likely to exist elsewhere:

If we understand the phenomenon of revival traditions as being those performances that anyone other than a native to a particular tradition in his or her own normal cultural context performs, we can see that several layers exist. (Shay 2014: 620).

The main contribution of this study to discussions of the mobilisation of performing arts in an Indian nationalist context is that it provides a case study in which several strands co-exist at the same time. Whilst revivalist processes were going on in Guwahati and elsewhere, which sought to re-position the dance practices of Assam’s monasteries in national institutions and for consumption by the urban middle class, there was a simultaneous stream of artistic endeavour happening simultaneously based in the *sattras* that is harder to categorise as ‘revival’.

In this section, I have provided an overview of the literature around national music revivals, and considered some of the insights from this scholarship which this thesis will engage. Of primary significance, for this study, are the ways in which performance practices and their representation can be seen to contribute to the building of national narratives.

ii. ‘Worlding Dance’¹⁴

The second area of scholarship which informs my study of the mobilisation of performance practices into new arenas is concerned with the transnational movement of dance forms, through various types of human movement, particularly colonialism (Bor 2007; Engelhardt 2014), tourism (Kringelbach and Skinner 2012), touring (Katrak 2008; Kedhar 2014), and migration and diaspora (Kabir 2011; Lopez y Royo 2004). Drawing from history, tourism studies, sociology, human geography and anthropology, these scholars of dance in transit share my interest in performance practices which are consumed by cultural ‘others’. In such settings, dance may be perceived as exotica, or

¹⁴ *Worlding Dance* is the title of a collection of essays on the transnational lives of dances, edited by Susan Leigh Foster.

re-shaped in hybrid forms to suit the expectations and values of new host cultures. In the following section, I start by considering encounters between Indian dancers and foreign audiences both ‘at home’ and ‘on tour’ to contextualise my case studies which look at Assamese *bhakats* creating new connections along similar routes. I then turn to some recent scholarship on the globalisation of dance, including the consumption of Indian dance by ‘foreigners’ in order to think about some of the important issues at stake during the translations of dance across cultures. I describe how the insights of this scholarship help to raise important questions about encounters with the cultural ‘other’ but I also argue that such studies often privilege the perspective of the consumer of dance: so in such writing the consumer is positioned as the ‘we’ and the dancer as ‘they’. If the dancer’s motivations for mobilising their art form across borders or to new audiences, they are frequently assumed to be economic, but I have seen very little ethnographic or interview-based research which corroborates this.

a) Globalising Indian Dance

The colonial archive provides abundant examples of ‘outsider’ encounters of Indian performing arts in India and on tour. Never monolithic, these interactions formed part of what Engelhardt describes as an ‘ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, a relationship that was not static but in constant flux, depending on the cultural specificity of the moment or place.’ (Engelhardt 2014: 509). Schofield discusses some 18th-century examples of Englishmen and women who engaged with Indian performing arts favourably:

In the circles in which Sir William Jones¹⁵ moved in the late eighteenth century, attitudes towards Indian culture and religion were more varied and often more generous than we have come to expect given the racial segregation and prejudice at the heart of late colonial rule [...] Some English *nabobs* of the eighteenth century embraced Indian lifestyles and tastes to the extent of “going native” and becoming what William Dalrymple has called “white Mughals” (2003). Woodfield describes a thriving and sincere interest in Hindustani music among Anglo-Indian families at the courts of Awadh and Benares, such as the Plowdens and Fowkes, many of whom were invited by their aristocratic hosts to court performances, and some of whom themselves patronized Indian music and dance (1994 and 2000: 149–80; also Shah 1992; Farrell 1997: 28–44). (Schofield 2010: 506).

¹⁵ Sir William Jones served in India as a High Court Judge from 1783 and authored ‘On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos’ in 1784 (Tagore 1882)

I differentiate this sort of interest from Saidian ‘Orientalism’—the knowledge systems created about the ‘East’ by western scholars during the colonial era—because it attempts to understand the art forms it sees in emic terms. An ‘orientalist’ response on the other hand enjoys or reviles what it sees in relation to European standards of taste and legibility: it exoticises by seeing through a veil of preconceptions.

But the colonial archive also reveals overtly racist perceptions of Indian performing arts, with commentators considering them at best inferior to European standards or at worse as criminal.¹⁶ Attitudes of incomprehension of and revulsion for India’s cultures by outside observers emerge especially during the late colonial period, and were epitomised in Macauley’s famous proclamation that ‘I have never found one among them [‘the orientalist’] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.’ (Macauley in Sharp 1920: 22). As Mishra puts it:

[T]he institutionalized racism of the British in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century India did not make for easy journeys across the very different cultures of the Indians and the British. (Mishra 2005: 440).

‘Racial self-consciousness’ made appreciation of the performing arts of the now ‘inferior’ Indian more difficult to stomach.

After Independence and Partition in 1947, there was a swift diversification in the ways in which Indian performing artists encountered foreign audiences both at home and abroad. In India, tourism, rather than colonialism, has become the principle context for cross-cultural musical exchange. After the turmoil and violence of independence, tourists returned to the subcontinent in small numbers: in 1951, 16,829 foreign tourists entered India (Piramanayagam 2018). During the year 2001, more than 2.5 million foreign tourists arrived in India and in 2002, the ‘Incredible India’ campaign was launched by the central government in order to re-brand and energetically market India as a tourist destination.¹⁷ By 2008—the same year the monks of Majuli first toured outside India—the number of tourists in India had more than doubled (5.2 million) and in 2017 ten million tourists entered India, of which almost a million were from the UK

¹⁶ ‘Advocates for the ban on nautch [the colonial term for Indian dance practices] argued that they were fighting brothels and trafficking in women – all dancers were prostitutes and the performing arts of hereditary *tawā’ifs* and *devadāsīs* were simply fronts for prostitution.’ (Walker 2014a: 95). Walker cites Geraldine Forbes (1996). For colonial and nationalist criminalisation of Indian dancing traditions see also Soneji 2012; Morcom 2014; Srinivasan 1985; and Chakraborty 2000.

¹⁷ For an account of the campaign written by its principal architect Amitabh Kant, then Joint Secretary for the Ministry of Tourism see Kant 2009. For a more critical analysis, see Kerrigan et al. 2012.

(Indian Tourism Statistics 2018). Apart from staged performance in concert halls, foreign visitors encounter Indian performing arts in *melas*, markets, trains, temples, ashrams and dargahs, but increasingly in newer settings specifically targeting tourists such as hotel lobbies, restaurants and international festivals. Whilst there has been no comprehensive research into the relationship between India's performing arts and tourism, there are a few isolated case studies exploring such interactions, for example Maciszewski 2006, Ayyagari 2009: 306-344.

An increasing number of encounters between Indian performing arts and international audiences now take place outside India. By 1990, Neuman was able to write that 'Indian art music... has a "dynamic nucleus" of listeners in North America and Europe.' (Neuman 1990). Studies of Indian music worlds have demonstrated that validation abroad is an important part of building respect amongst musical communities 'at home'. According to Daniel Neuman, 'international' musicians—i.e. those who had travelled abroad—received better pay and more prestige than those who stayed behind: 'For the enterprising younger artists, going West is seen as a successful if somewhat circuitous route to succeeding back East.' (Neuman 1980). Similarly, Ayyagari points out the importance of touring for a group of Mirasi Musicians in the United States in 2005 and 2008:

These tours also give the group more credibility in the Manganiyar community. Having performed abroad, the musicians from the "Hearts of Hope Tour" return to Rajasthan with a renewed sense of self and a reputation among the Manganiyar community as being an international artist. (Ayyagari 2009: 339)

Members of the vast South Asian diaspora (15.5 million in 2017, according to the UN World Migration Report 2018) have also performed, taught and patronised South Asian performing arts across the globe and these encounters have received extensive scholarly attention.¹⁸ The United Kingdom has more than three million citizens who describe themselves as 'South Asian' (ONS 2011), and hosts South Asian performing arts academies, dance companies, *melas* and music festivals year-round (Iyer 1997).

Scholarship on South Asian arts on tour is, however, sparse, and ethnographies virtually non-existent (exceptions are parts of Katrak 2008 and Kedhar 2014), making this thesis particularly timely. It is surprising how little work has been done on Indian

¹⁸ On Indian dance and music in the diaspora, with a predominant focus on the Panjabi folk form *bhangra* and its diasporic manifestations, see Katrak 2008; Kabir 2011; Lopez y Royo 2004; Chaudhuri and Seeger 2010; Khabra 2012; Norman 2008; Banerjea 2000; Gopinath 1995; Um 2012; and Sahota 2014.

performers on tour, given that it is a significant site of cross-cultural encounter and an important source of income for many of the artists under discussion, but also that ‘foreign returned’ status has a significant positive impact on Indian artists’ reputation and income (Neuman 1973 and 1990; Ayyagari 2012; and personal observation during more than ten years working with Indian performing artists). Histories of the Great Exhibitions of Europe in the mid nineteenth century have noted the appearance of South Asian performers, such as ‘dancing girls imported especially for the entertainment of fairgoers.’ (Breckenridge 1989; Fauser 2005; Qureshi 2012). According to Bor, however, ‘the first professional Indian dance troupe to perform in Europe,’ arrived earlier, in 1838 (Bor 2007). Known as the ‘Bayaderes’¹⁹ the group consisted of ‘Temple dancers’ from South India who travelled to Paris in 1838, and then on to London in early 1839. The dancers evoked mixed responses: Englehardt identifies English reviews which revealed recognition of and admiration for the ‘poetry’ and complexity of the dance, and a desire to understand its codes:

The general public likewise recognized a language system in the movements and gestures of the dancers and understood that the meanings being imparted were sacred. A letter addressed to Yates and published in the Morning Post requested that he include a key in the playbill so that audiences could better “understand what has been the mode of worship in the vast Eastern world nearly throughout the whole vita of ages known and forgotten” (18 October 1838). (Engelhardt 2014: 524).

Englehardt provides various such examples in which audience members recognise the complexity of a dance form, and wish to understand it on its own terms, despite a more dominant discourse which ‘casts the British as already enlightened in contrast to the inferior, primitive, monstrous Indian Other’ (ibid.: 530).

However, in the 1830s, audience expectations had been built on poetry, ballets and operas with ‘Indian’ characters, settings and stories, but written by poets and playwrights and composers who had never been there. As Englehardt puts it ‘Suspending their disbelief, English audiences accepted the white, ethereal Marie Taglioni in her pink tights and gossamer as the embodiment of the exotic other, the Indian bayadere.’ (ibid. 515). Bor quotes a UK columnist who finds the *actual* Indian dancers disappointing: ‘We must say that we should much prefer Taglioni’s or Duvernay’s imitation to the original’. (Bor 2007: 61) According to two other French

¹⁹ Named after the opera ‘Le Dieu et la Bayadère,’ based on Goethe’s “Der Gott und die Bajadere” (“The God and the Dancing Girl”) which, according to M Engelhardt, drew on ‘orientalist fantasy, [...] first-hand accounts of Indian cultural practices and religious mythology.’ (2014: 511).

newspapers, the touring Indian dancers, unable to recognise themselves in their orientalist reflections, found the French ballerinas' dances to be 'licentious'. (Bor 2007: 58; Englehardt 2014: 521). Though an 'orientalist' might enjoy, even be artistically inspired by notions and images of Indian performing arts, the results were nonetheless of European origin and bore little resemblance to actual South Asian performance practices. But French poet and critic Theophile Gautier represented a more overtly racist strand of opinion, likening the dancers' head movements to a "bird regurgitating," and commenting on the "rolling of the eyes," and "prodigious winks in which the whites and darks of the eye vanish". (Bor 2007: 61).

According to Joan Erdman (1987), it was Uday Shankar, 'India's first modern dance choreographer' (p. 79) who, through his repeated tours and sustained work 'brought Indian dance to the West' in a more sophisticated way (Erdman 1987 and 1996). Abraham (2007) and Erdman have commented on the prevalence of audience reactions which focused on Shankar's beauty and physical presence. As Erdman puts it: 'All attention was focused on his beautiful body, elegant headdress, and sculptural poses.' (Erdman 1987: 78). In contrast to the mixed reviews of the 'Bayadere' a century before, Shankar was generally received well in Europe and America. Purkayastha suggests that this was because of Shankar's ability to match 'Orientalist' expectations:

I would like to suggest that Shankar's early work displays a tendency to play to the popular European imaginary of the Empire. This is evidenced in the orientalism of his early 1930s career in Europe, after leaving Anna Pavlova's company, through mythology-inspired works such as Indra, Tandava Nritya, Kalia Daman, Gandharva, and Kartikeya (dates unknown) (Photo 6). I see this as Shankar "performing Empire," a phase in which he willingly identifies, as a native of India, with Euro-American expectations of the exotic oriental dancer.' (Purkayastha 2012: 75).

Erdman similarly argues that Shankar crafted staging and timing to make his performances more comprehensible to western audiences (Erdman 1996). These considerations, as well as western scholarship, shaped the touring work of Bhabananda Barbayan, which I describe in Chapters Five and Six.

The literature surrounding historical encounters between Indian performers and foreign (mostly British) audiences reveals that such encounters have been characterised at different times and places by racism, exploitation, orientalism and exoticisation, advocacy and desire to understand and appreciate other cultures on emic terms. The contemporary relationship between Indian dancers and 'foreign' audiences has received

less scholarly attention, so it is therefore necessary to turn to the broader ethnographic and sociological literature on contemporary encounters with foreign dances, in order to create a picture of the current global scene which Indian performance practices currently navigate.

b) Globalising Dance

Ethnographies of performance practices on tour include Martin Stokes' ethnography of a tour of Black Sea Turks in Ireland (1994) and Jeff Titon's work on a tour by a group of Old Regular Baptist singers from Southeast Kentucky (1999). A lot of more work has been done looking at dance forms which move across borders not on short-term tours, but as part of human migration and long-term circulation of culture over time.

Collections of essays edited by Hélène Neveu Kringelbach and Jonathan Skinner (2012) and Susan Leigh Foster (2009) respectively consider a variety of dance styles which are consumed globally. For example, Jonathan Skinner discusses the circulation of 'Jive' between the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand (Skinner 2012) and Wulff considers a 'Transnational Ballet World' centred around the five 'old ballet centres': Paris, Copenhagen, St Petersburg, New York and London (Wulff 2012: 46-47).

Though this work does much to help understand the consumption of new forms of dance as it travels between different countries and across different bodies, it is hard to find much detailed engagement with the motivations and lives of dance producers—the teachers and choreographers who make the dances—or on the choreographic alteration which happen as new bodies inhabit older dances. The reason for this lacunae, I argue, is twofold. Firstly, there is a reluctance amongst scholars of 'revived' or 'commodified' forms to make comparisons with a so-called 'original' dance, in case in doing so they are charged with rarifying or privileging the latter as somehow more 'authentic'. Shay, for example, points out that folklorists and ethnomusicologists working on "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm 1983 cited in Shay 2014: 619) use the word 'revival' as 'a euphemism used to refer to performances and individuals that the speaker considers "impure" and inauthentic' (ibid).²⁰

²⁰ He himself uses the term "revival dance" 'to refer to dance performances that occur in any decontextualized context outside of dance in the field' (612) but does not really define what 'the field' constitutes. On page 613 he cites Theresa Buckland's 1999 book *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography* as the source for the term 'Dance in the Field', but the contributors to that book discuss a range of 'field' sites, not circumscribed by notions of authenticity and originality. For example Johnson Jones 1999.

In the past, many scholars have been reluctant to engage with anything but “authentic” dance in the field, regarding all else as “fakelore.” Dance ethnographers Georgiana Gore and Maria Koutsouba encapsulate this attitude: “Any representation of traditional dance outside its customary context is not more than ‘imitation’ and may be seen as an artificial and adulterated version of the ‘original’” (Gore and Koutsouba 1992:104 cited in Shay 2014:622).

Shay, on the contrary, argues that in any dance practice is worthy of study:

As artificial, slick, or cheesy as some of these layers may appear, each is worthy of study because each layer contains social and political messages regarding ethnicity, class, and gender, and each raises deeply complex issues of authenticity, appropriation, and ownership. (Shay 2014: 622).

Johnson Jones defends the study of ‘staged’ African dance, in very similar terms:

From a dance anthropologist’s point of view, the fact that these dances are staged makes them neither less interesting nor less amenable to ethnographic analysis. Undoubtedly, removal from their former contexts alters their meaning; but the movements of the staged dances maintain a cultural validity which can act as a window through which more understanding can be gained of the people who perform them. (Johnson Jones 1999: 100).

This desire to see ‘revived’ dance forms on their own terms, and not in any hierarchical relationship with an ‘original’ source (and the charges of nativisation or revisionism which may come with it) leads to a reluctance to consider the relationship between source and staged material: it is the relationship with the current context which is, in post-modern scholarship, deemed a permissible and also less contentious area of study. However, I think that fruitful comparisons can be made without rarifying the ‘original’. Walker, for example, carefully considers the various components which make up Kathak, without denying that Kathak is an important and ‘authentic’ performing art in its own right (Walker 2014a). In this thesis, I do not intend to argue that the performance practices of the *namghar* and in *bhaona* performances are more ‘authentic’ than Sattriya dance. Indeed, in Chapter Three, I emphasise the absorption of different materials and the changes over time which have already been happening to *sattriya* arts even before the recent performances in national and international contexts. These are not ‘pure’ dance forms somehow corrupted or made any less authentic by their re-shaping and re-population as Sattriya and internationally toured dances. But through their name and through the way they are spoken and written about, these ‘new’ dances are explicitly linked to *sattriya* arts, and what is more, much of the performance content

can be found, one way or another, within the *sattrā* traditions. The relationship with the ‘source’ material cannot simply be ignored. Paul Gilroy provides a useful way of thinking about the relationship between the ‘source’ and the hybrid cultural forms produced in diaspora contexts in his discussion of the ‘Black Atlantic’, without privileging a notion of authenticity. Gilroy, like Shay and Johnson Jones, argues against a privileging of ‘roots’—i.e. a causal relationship between black music and a single originating space in Africa (Gilroy 2003)—without wholly rejecting the usefulness of considering continuity through, amongst other things ‘an invocation of tradition’ (185). Gilroy proffers the notion of ‘routes’—a way of looking at connections between ‘origins’ and ‘hybrid’ productions by tracing the routes that have been undertaken in between. By focusing on mobility itself, this thesis does precisely that: it looks at the routes that *sattrā* arts take—via the Sangeet Natak Academy in Delhi; iconic venues in London; schools in Newcastle and cultural centres in Guwahati—to understand the relationship between a ‘new’ form and its nominal origin.

The second reason why the literature on globalised performance practice often neglects the ‘original’ practices is because of the pervasiveness of what Graeber sees as an economistic reading of exchange, exemplified by George Simmel (whose notion of value is key to Appadurai’s influential theory of commodity exchange) which prioritises the consumer and patterns of consumption.

Value, according to Simmel, is not rooted in human labor, nor does its existence depend on any larger social system. It arises from exchange. Hence, it is purely an effect of individual desire. The value of an object is the degree to which a buyer wants it. It is measured by how much that person is willing to give up in order to get it. (Graeber 2001: 31).

Thus, many more studies ask what it means to leisure learners to dance ‘other’ (often ‘non-white’) dance forms, than what it means to the teachers to teach (white) ‘others’. For example, Felicia Hughes-Freeland’s chapter is particularly useful to this study of musical mobility, in thinking through different kinds of encounter between various sorts of dance tourists (long-term, short-term, foreign, local, urban and so on) in Southeast Asia (Hughes-Freeland 2012). However, by focusing on what is the tourist seeing, feeling and getting out of the encounter—what she refers to as ‘embodied participant consumption’ (115)—the study privileges the consumer perspective, and we do not get an insight into why these encounters are of use to the indigenous performers themselves, or how they experience them. it is an important part of the artist’s life.

Similarly Shay's 2008 study is useful in its treatment of the phenomenon of 'exotic' dance craze sweeping the US. His is an example of a growing body of work—focusing in particular on Belly Dancing—which considers leisure learning of 'other' cultures (see also Kraus 2017; Moe 2012; Sellers-Young 2013) but again, it does so from the perspective of the learner, not the teachers or 'original practitioners' who draw from indigenous practices to create commodifiable dances. As Shay himself states, 'This study examines, describes, and analyses the phenomenon of millions of mainstream Americans who sought through dance to assume exotic new identities.' (Shay 2008:5). He argues that the phenomenon of Americans learning 'foreign' dances is about 'The search for ethnicity through the exotic dances of the Other' (7), without really considering what it is about for that 'Other'. It is only when Shay writes a section entitled 'Economic Aspects of the Movement' that he mentions an 'Enterprising Egyptian' who makes money from selling belly dancing costumes to foreigners (22) and 'Renowned tango dancers in Argentina [who] learn a considerable revenue both in Buenos Aires and abroad through their teaching and stage performances in popular tango reviews' (ibid.). Though the consumers are afforded psychological and anthropological questions about the way that they value the dances they perform, the motivations of the foreign teachers are reduced to economics.

In the introduction to this thesis, I showed why mobilisation is important to the *bhakats* of Majuli: how spreading the word of Krishna through proselytisation, and practising devotion through communal song, is at the heart of the strand of Assamese Vaishnavism that they follow. In Chapter Three, I show how performance practices have been valued by *sattrā* traditions in relation to their ability to spread the story of Krishna and bring people into relation. In Chapter Six, I show the on-going power and usefulness of sharing dance with foreigners and outsiders to the *sattrā* tradition, in terms of gaining validation both at home and abroad. Thus, the mobilising practices I consider are framed with the intention of the practitioners themselves. The ways in which Assamese performers have anticipated the imagined values of the gatekeepers of culture in order to mobilise *sattriya* arts, examined in Chapters Three, Four and Five, are therefore framed with an understanding that mobilisation is not simply a *response* to an outside demand for national or exotic dance, but is an active engagement with different value systems in order to build new connections. Taking this perspective allows for a focus on the creative work of the artists, rather than the consumption of foreign dancers who are positioned as the 'other' of this study, rather than the 'self'.

In this section I have argued that though increasing numbers of scholars are now dealing with issues of the mobilisation of dance across international borders and between globalised bodies, there is still very little work on the perspective of the producer. This trend continues the trajectory of scholarship analysed during the colonial era where the perspective of the white European observer has received far more emphasis than that of the touring artists, whose accounts are often lost to history. In this study, I therefore seek to fill this gap in the literature, by drawing on ‘mobile’ and ‘embodied’ ethnographic field work to comment on the experiences and creative choices of Indian performers on tour.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have critically examined my field methods, described my positionality in the field, my particular way in to *sattrā* culture and my entrepreneurial engagement with the subjects of study and my gender. I did so in order to make transparent how I was able to gain access to particular information and insights that might have been impossible for another scholar but also the limitations of my research. I also considered insights from other ethnographers who have reflected on comparable circumstances, and shown how my professional engagement with my informants and being accompanied by my family in the field yielded useful insights into areas which are rarely acknowledged in accounts of ethnographic fieldwork.

I have also provided an introduction to the three areas of literature which have considered dance ‘on the move’: transported and translated across borders, bodies, races, genders and class. Though studies of revival (including nationalist revival), tourism and globalisation provide important contexts for understanding the different worlds that the monks of my study encounter, I suggest Graeber’s theory of value provides a useful analytical tool with which to analyse the practices of performers dancing through various spaces. It is a theory that allows me to focus on the agency and motives of the dancers themselves and to understand the value in mobilising their dance form in new places, without privileging the dominant discourses of those places. Whilst the *bhakats* in my study aim to make their dances intelligible within new value systems, they are not wholly fluent in the discourses they encounter. Mobilising their dance for leisure learners, foreign tours and the concert stage reveals values which remain invisible if we are too focused on these sites of consumption.

Chapter Two: Vaishnavism and the Sattrā Institution of Assam

This chapter provides an introduction to Assamese Vaishnavism, the religion practiced by the *bhakats* of this study, and the *sattrā*, a residential institution where monastic devotees have cultivated and maintained performance practices for centuries. It is not an exhaustive history of this complex and internally differentiated religion, but is intended to provide a context for the specific monastery where the *bhakats* of my study live and practice. In a study that asks how Bhabananda Barbayan and other members of UKS have mobilised *sattriya* arts beyond the *sattrā* and the value of doing so, it is crucial to examine the institutional and theological context from which their art forms have emerged. My discussion of the relationship between the state of Assam and the Indian nation provides the political context in which the classicisation and nationalisation of *sattriya* arts occurred.

I start with a broad discussion of the form of Vishnu worship as it is currently practiced in Assam, considering the main emphases of the faith. I then consider the scholarship around Assamese Vaishnavism, arguing that preoccupations with establishing Assam's inclusion in the Indian nation as well as distinctiveness from neighbouring West Bengal (both reactions to historical injustice) have shaped the way Assamese Vaishnavism is represented in dominant narratives. In the second part of the chapter, I talk about the specific strand of Vaishnavism that is followed by the *bhakats* of this study, which is aligned with the dominant narratives already discussed, and highlight how a *sattrā* from the *nika samghati* was likely to become part of a study like this, particularly given my point of entry (tourism). In the last part, I 'zoom in' on UKS, where the *bhakats* of my study live and work, with a physical description of its layout and functioning. The physical layout of the *sattrā* will become particularly significant in Chapter Three when I discuss the different types of performance practices used in different parts of the monastic property.

Assamese Vaishnavism

The performers at the heart of this study live in UKS, an Assamese Vaishnavite *sattrā* located on Majuli, a large inter-riverine island on the Brahmaputra, which flows through the northeast Indian state of Assam.



Map 1: Map of India showing location of Assam



Map 2: Map of Assam showing location of Majuli Island

Vaishnavism is the division of Hinduism which regards Vishnu as the most important god of the Hindu trinity (Shiva-Vishnu-Brahma); and its adherents worship avatars of

Vishnu, especially Krishna. Vaishnavism exists in various different forms throughout South Asia and across the world²¹ and Vaishnava beliefs and practices have been followed in the northeast of India, alongside Shaivism and Buddhism since the eighth century and probably even earlier (see for example I Chatterjee 2013a). Contemporary Assamese Vaishnavism—also referred to as ‘Neo-Vaishnavism’²² and ‘Eksarana Nardharma’²³ in various accounts—started as a small reformist movement in the late fifteenth century, only becoming the dominant religion of the region during the late seventeenth century. Today, Assam also has large animist, Christian and Muslim populations, but Vaishnavism remains the most widely practised religion of the state.

Understood by the *bhakats* of my study to have been initiated by founder saint and polymath Srimanta Sankaradeva, and instituted by his principle devotee Madhavadeva, Assamese Vaishnavism is influenced by the *bhakti* movement, which focuses on devotion of Lord Krishna through collective singing, playing of percussion instruments and chanting the many names of god.²⁴ According to William Smith (2007):

In many respects, the Eka Nama Sharana Dharma is much like Vaishnava groups elsewhere in northern India. It emphasizes the primacy of *bhakti*, which is considered more desirable than *mukti*, or liberation, and it is attained by listening to and repeating the names of God, as in the communal singing of *kirtans*. The texts held in the highest regard have been the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavata Purana, the latter especially in the form of Shankaradeva’s Assamese rendering of its tenth book, or *Dasam*, as it is called. (164).

In order to understand the value of mobilising *sattriya* arts beyond the *sattr*, from the perspective of the *bhakats*, it is crucial to take note of two points here. Firstly, Smith points out that *bhakti*, devotion to God whilst living in the here-and-now, is more important than *mukti*, liberation from worldly concerns and a desire to blend your mind

²¹ According to Flood 1996, the five most dominant Vaishnava strains are Sri Vaishnava of Tamil Nadu; Gaudiya Vaishnavism (also known as Caitanya Vaishnavism, after its founder) practiced mostly in Bengal; Vithoba worship, from Maharashtra and northern Karnataka; the Ramanandi Sampradaya with followers throughout northern India; and the northern Sant tradition, which follows the doctrine of the poet-saint Kabir.

²² For example in Bezbaruah 1934 and S N Sarma 1966.

²³ According to Maheswar Neog: ‘Sankaradeva’s form of Vaisnavism is officially named *ekaśarana nardharma*, having a strict monotheism as the central doctrine and the recitation or remembering of the names of the One Deity as the principal form of worship.’ (Neog 1965: 362).

²⁴ Krishna’s early life story is described in the tenth chapter of the *Bhagavata Purana* and literary and performance traditions throughout India. The *Bhagavata Purana* (c. sixth-eighth-century C.E.) is an important text to Vaishnavites and in the *bhakti* movement (Matchett 2003). Krishna also plays an important role in book six of the *Mahabharata*, the Indian epic which describes the war between the Kaurava and the Pandava brothers.

and being and loose yourself in a connection with God demonstrates. Many of the *bhakats* of my study were keen to emphasis to me in interviews and conversations that Krishna is in everyone, so through the way to reach God was through connectivity to others, not through isolation or inward meditation. When I asked them if they saw a difference between dancing for Vaishnavite devotees and for foreign audiences, they did not, as they imagined Krishna was in everyone. In Neog's reading of the *Bhakti-ratnākara*, a doctrinal treatise written by Sankaradeva (analysed in detail by Maheswar Neog in Chapter VI of Neog 1965), he states that 'the individual soul is nothing different from the Supreme Self [Krishna]' (Neog 1965:215).

The second point to take note of in Smith's account, closely connected to the first, is that Assamese Vaishnavism is not about looking inwards, or taking part in esoteric rituals, it is an outward-looking, communal pursuit:

Bhakti is the bearer of great fruits [...] and has to be cultured through devout celebration of the tales of Acyuta [Vishnu] in reading or singing and through listening to it and that in the company of *bhaktas* (Neog 1965:216).

By '*bhakta*', Neog does not mean *bhakats*, as in 'monks', but the broader definition of 'devotee'—meaning anyone who loves Krishna. The key point is that devotion is to be done 'in company': with others. Most villages, and even some large homes in Assam have a *namghar*, a building where Vaishnavites gather to sing *kirtans* and *borgeet*, the songs written by, or based on the poetry of the founder saints. Religious heads from *sattras*, the institutions dedicated to worship, as described in the 'Note on Terms' p. 8, are sometimes invited to attend and lead these meetings, but they are generally community led. Every *namghar* and devotee claims affiliation to a *sattra* through family tradition, and/or because they have chosen to take 'initiation' through a short ritual enacted by the *sattradhikar*, the spiritual head of the institution. There are around 850 *sattras* in the northeast of India,²⁵ which are divided into four sects known as *samhati* (the four *samhati* are *brahma*, *kali*, *purusha* and *nika*) which have varying rules and approaches to worship, attract different sorts of followers, and who believe in differing foundational narratives. It is significant to the study of mobilisation of dance,

²⁵ This figure is taken from the website of the Asom Sattra Mahasabha, an umbrella organisation which seeks to represent all of Assam's *sattras* (www.asomsattramahasabha.org). The exact number is hard to ascertain because some counts only include the foundational *sattra* and not the branches (so, for example, Kamalabari would be counted once in some surveys, but as five in others, because of its various branches).

that the *bhakats* of my study belong to the *nika samhati*, as I demonstrate later in this chapter.

To understand contemporary Assamese Vaishnavism, it is important to examine Assam's historical and geographical position in relation to India. The way that Assamese Vaishnavism has developed in the twentieth-century is inextricably linked to the broader modern history of Assam as a whole. The *bhakats* mobilise their performance practices from a locale which has been historically and geographically marginalised: the joy of achieving national recognition, and the prestige of international touring can only be fully appreciated with an understanding what it means to be 'Assamese'.

Recent scholarship on Assamese Vaishnavism is abundant in Assam and virtually non-existent outside the state, with the important exception of William Smith (2007), who focuses on the literature of the poet-saint Sankaradeva.²⁶ This reflects a more general neglect of Assamese history and culture in Indian and international scholarship. The two most comprehensive and well-known studies are Maheswar Neog's 1965 *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement of Assam* (which is cited in nearly every account written since) and S N Sarma's 1966 *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. These accounts provide the backbone of contemporary understanding about the spread of Vaishnavism in northeast India. After this, works like Sivanath Barman's 1999 *An Unsung Colossus: An Introduction to the Life and Works of Sankaradeva*; the various works of Borkakoti, including *Srimanta Sankaradeva: an epoch maker* (EBH Publishers, 2012), and *Srimanta Sankaradeva: a multi-faceted genius* 2005 and *Srimanta Sankaradeva: a total personality* (1995), are all predominantly based on Neog and S N Sarma's research.

Much of Neog's historical research was based on the *caritas*—devotional hagiographies intended to celebrate the founding fathers of Assamese Vaishnavism and spread the Vaishnava faith, rather than provide a critical historical account. Today, writing on Sankaradeva and the Vaishnava movement continues to be inspired by religious zeal and, at times, even defensive chauvinism. On the other hand histories of the Indian north east which are not focussed directly on Sankaradeva do not mention him or his work, despite the fact that the saint is credited with starting a significant

²⁶ The website 'A Tribute to Sankaradeva'—www.tributetosankaradeva.org—provides a large bibliography of published and unpublished articles, books and PhD theses on Sankaradeva and Assamese Vaishnavism, including links and pdf's.

cultural revolution. Indrani Chatterjee has worked to construct an evidence-based history of the region, drawing on epigraphs, coins and texts, but her work does not mention Sankaradeva or the early Vaishnava movement at all, due to lack of reliable primary-source evidence (2013a). Similarly, Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*, based on the *buranjis*, the chronicles of the Assam kings, does not mention the saint or any Vaishnavite 'movement' (1906).

When did the recent emphasis on Sankaradeva and Assamese Vaishnavism take hold, and what lead to its ascendancy as the dominant narrative of the state? In the early twentieth century, Assam's new middle class elite spearheaded a nationalist movement in the state (Sharma 2011). The contributors to literary journal *Jonaki*, founded by the Assamese litterateur Lakshminath Bezbarua formulated a vision of Assam as a modern state, positioned firmly in the imagined nation of India (ibid.). According to Jayeeta Sharma, the litterateur Lakshminath Bezbarua, seeking 'to revive and modernise Assamese Vaishnavism. [...] embarked upon a recovery of Assamese Vaishnavism's past through writings that celebrated Sankardeb's life and teachings.' (Sharma 2011: 174). Bezbarua was personally involved with Assamese Vaishnavism, and had strong family connections to Kamalabari Sattrā, which was founded on his grandfather's land and expanded with help from his father (Deva Goswami 2004). Bezbarua is revered in Assam, and has been described as the "'unofficial dictator' of Assamese literature" (D Pathak and Neog, 2004: xi) and "Sahityarathi" or "charioteer of literature" in Assamese accounts (Neog 1965, sahityarathi.com). His words have had a significant impact on subsequent scholarship, and the revival of Assamese Vaishnavism was therefore dominated by the particular traits, practices and beliefs of Kamalabari *sattrā* and its branches.

As well as this Kamalabari-bias, the significance of which will become clear below, broader preoccupations of Assam's new nationalists pervade the way that they spoke and wrote about Assam and its cultures; in particular, local Vaishnavite practices. I identify three particular strands of nationalist ideology here which, in turn, effected the way that revivalists wrote about and reconstructed the performing arts of Assam's *sattrā*, to be discussed in Chapter Three.

The first preoccupation was with asserting Assam as distinctive from, and of equal value to the neighbouring state of Bengal. Assam has a history of political and cultural subordination to Bengal. For the first fifty years of British rule, the area which now constitutes the eight northeastern states of India, including Assam, was administered as

an appendage of Bengal. Bengali middle-class workers, already trained in colonial law and administrative methods, occupied the majority of the middle-rung jobs in Assam's courts and tea gardens. For thirty-seven years, Bengali was the language of instruction in Assamese schools and, for the Assamese, the colonial period was experienced as a time of Bengali, rather than British, domination (Saikia, 2004; Misra, 2007). Assamese distinctiveness was asserted first in relation to language, then through religion and also, as we see in the next chapter, through its performance practices.

According to Sharma, Assamese intellectuals felt the need to 'challenge competing versions of history which questioned the distinctiveness of Assam's religious heritage.' (Sharma, 2011: 172). Lakshminath Bezbaruah fervently distances Assamese Vaishnavism from Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal in a lecture he delivered in the *darbar* of Baroda in 1934 (Sharma 2011: 175; Bezbaruah 1934).

Writers ignorant of historical facts have often represented that Sankaradeva's school of neo-Vaisnavism in Assam is an offshoot of the Caitanya movement in Bengal. This is misconstruction and misrepresentation of real historical facts. Sankaradeva was born in 1449 A.D., whereas Caitanya was born in 1486 A.D. Caitanya was not born when Sankara set out on his pilgrimage. When Caitanya turned an ascetic in 1510 A.D., Sankara's Vaisnavism was in its full swing. Sankara could not have met Caitanya during his first pilgrimage. But during his second pilgrimage from Barpeta he met Caitanya about 1530 A.D. at Puri. There was not any conversation between them as Caitanya was then observing silence [...] The idolization of the female element which formed the marked feature of Northern Vaisnavism and of the Caitanya movement in Bengal, is conspicuous only by its total absence from Sankara's Vaisnavism. Caitanya's conception of madhura rasa or love relations between the lover and the beloved as the mode of worship of God by His devotee, to which he gave prominence, does not find favour in Sankaradeva's school of thought. There is neither the combined worship of Radha and Krishna of Caitanya, nor of Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacarya, nor of Rukmini-Krishna of Namdev, nor of the SitaRama of Ramananda. The Eka-Sarana of the Gita superimposed upon the idealism of dasya-bhakti with satsanga or companionship with bhaktas of the Srimadbhagavata and the Hanumanti katha, i.e., the unwavering and firm devotion and allegiance to one and the only one God as of Hanuman to Ramacandra, is the main plank of Sankara's creed. (Bezbaruah 1934: 12).

Bezbaruah was crystallising a home-grown religion, distinct in particular from the Vaishnavism of Bengal (Sharma 2011: 176; Misra 2007: xi).

At the same time as asserting cultural distance from Bengal, the nation builders had another important preoccupation: representing Assam as part of the Indian nation.

According to Yasmin Saikia, Assamese identities have been ‘marginalised economically and politically, peripheralised socially and culturally and their narratives [...] erased from the annals of national history.’ (Saikia, 2004: 39)²⁷ Assam was a late appendage to British India,²⁸ and did not feature in colonial and orientalist constructions of ‘India’. Bezbarua and his fellow revivalists responded to this by representing Assamese Vaishnavism as part of a broader *bhakti* tradition, and drawing links wherever possible with broader South Asian culture. In Bezbarua’s speech, quoted above, itself a statement of Assamese inclusion in pan-Indian Vaishnavism, he reminds his listeners that the area now known as Assam features in the Indian epics, during a time when Bengal was ‘probably under the sea.’

In ancient times it [Assam] was called Pragjyotishapura [...] About one thousand years before the Christian era, the greater part of lower Bengal was probably under the sea, while a considerable portion of Northern Bengal was included in Pragjyotisha, which was then a powerful kingdom and was often mentioned in the great epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Puranas. The Aryan wave extended to Kamarupa - the name by which Pragjyotisha came to be known afterwards - directly from Videha and Magadha long before the lower Bengal became habitable. (Bezbarua 1934).

As Sharma puts it ‘publicists enthusiastically participated in imagining a larger Indic sacred landscape that encompassed previously marginal sites such as Assam.’ (2011: 173). In the 1950s, Maheswar Neog took up the mantle of articulating Assam’s inclusion in the larger nation state, with works like *The Contribution of the Śaṅkaradeva Movement to the Culture and Civilisation of India* (1998). In Chapter Three, I show how *sattriya* performing arts, implicated in a similar project, have also been re-shaped and represented in relation to Indian mythologies, artforms and iconic treatises, rather than as inheritors of multiple lineages across international borders.

The third important concern of Assam’s nationalists was to project an image of the state as democratic and ‘modern’; free from the associations of barbarity, backwardness and irrationality that the racist discourses of the late colonial period had engendered (See page 61). This was to become manifest through their engagement with religion. In a classic national revival narrative, Bezbarua and his contemporaries articulated a decline of Neo-Vaishnavite culture in which ‘greedy gosains’ (another term for *sattradhikars*; Sharma 2011: 34) had hijacked the religious ideals of a golden era of

²⁷ On the contemporary marginalisation of Assam through the Indian media, see Batabyal 2015.

²⁸ Assam was annexed by the British in the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826

Vaishnavism and turned *sattras* into mercantile establishments. Just as with the musical revivals in India discussed in Chapter One, practices of a past golden era, considered to have been neglected or corrupted by traditional/religious knowledge keepers, were claimed for the nation and restored to their former glory by the rationalist-modernist urban middle classes (see Sharma 2011; Bakhle 2005; Walker 2014b; P Chatterjee 1993: 3). Sankaradeva was thereby refashioned as a democratic, anti-castist, anti-Brahminical figure head, who represented high culture and who pre-dated British rule. Bezbarua's 'Golden era' Sankaradeva thus embodied all the characteristics the anti-colonial Indian nationalists were looking for to present India as a nation worthy of independent rule.

Lakshminath Bezbarua championed a certain vision of Assamese Vaishnavism, coloured by his familiarity with Kamalabari Sattrā, and motivated by the specific preoccupations of Assamese nationalism. UKS, the *sattrā* at the centre of this thesis thus typifies the type of institution that has dominated representations of Assamese Vaishnavism since the early twentieth century. Modern Assamese Vaishnavism has been written about and developed in ways that assist Assam's integration into the notion of a unified, democratic Indian nation whilst maintaining the state's distinctiveness from Bengal. In Chapter Three, I discuss the way in which the mobilisation of *satttriya* performance practices on the national stage fulfils each of these important preoccupations. I also demonstrate how the *bhakats* actively change and re-arrange dance practices in ways that will be valued by the nation.

The Nika Sanghati and The Kamalabari Effect

In this section I consider the implications of conducting this study in relation to a community from the Kamalabari group of *sattras*. The doctrine of the *nika samhati*, and the work and lifestyle of the Kamalabari group in particular, dominate contemporary representations of Assamese Vaishnavism. This has had two significant implications: the first is that the dominant representation of Assamese Vaishnavism is of a religion founded by Sankaradeva. The second, is that the image of the religion is very closely wedded to Assamese nationalism: because Bezbarua and his contemporaries framed Sankaradeva as a crucial founding figure of Assamese nationalism, the religion and the state have been tied together.

UKS is part of the *nika samhati*, a division of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism which holds Sankaradeva as the founder father of the faith. Many Assamese Vaishnavites *do*

not see Sankaradeva as the founder father: as S N Sarma states: ‘Damodaradeva and Haridevi [founders of the *brahma samhata*] do not acknowledge Sankaradeva as the originator of their respective orders.’ (S N Sarma 1966: xii). The majority of Assamese Vaishnavites are affiliated to the *sattras* of the *brahma samhata* and yet, in contemporary descriptions of *sattriya* arts, as demonstrated in Chapter Three, Sankaradeva is presented as the preceptor of Assamese Vaishnavism. Despite S N Sarma’s acknowledgement, quoted above, even his account starts with Sankaradeva, stating: ‘The type of Vaishnavism pre-Sankaradeva is beyond the scope of this work.’ (S N Sarma 1966: xiii).

The ways in which Bezbarua re-framed Neo-Vaishnavism in modern, nationalistic terms has also had a lasting effect on subsequent literature. According to Audrey Cantlie:

Today Shankaradeva is venerated among Assamese Vaishnavas not only as the founder of their faith and an incarnation of Vishnu but as the originator of all that is peculiarly Assamese in their social organisation and culture and hence, in a sense, as the father of the Assamese nation (Cantlie 1984: xi).

She goes on to quote Bishnuram Medhi, formerly Chief Minister of Assam:

‘Anyone who cares to know Assam and her people [very] soon discovers that everything we call Assamese is rooted in the soil that was prepared more than five centuries ago by this Great Saint and Savant Sreemanta Shankar Deva’. (ibid. citing B Medhi 1963)

Both she and B Medhi imagine all Assamese Vaishnavas as one, and omit to mention that a dominant part of the community—the *brahma samhata*—do not regard Sankaradeva as the founder of the faith. The former Chief Minister’s words, from 1963, were echoed and expanded upon in a recent speech by current Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Sivasagar, Assam on February 5th, 2016, reported by the *Indian Express*:

Speaking about Sankaradeva’s spirit of nationalism, Prime Minister Modi also said he was full of respect for the saint-reformer, who could inspire the people here to become such good Assamese who would then also become very good Indians. “He was such a mahapurush who, despite living in a far-flung region, inspired the people to become good Assamese so that they could also become good Indians,” he said. “Sankaradeva spoke of and worked for nation-building, he strived for building human capital. He gave strength to community efforts through spiritual

consciousness. He travelled across the sub-continent to spread his gospel,” the prime minister said.’ (Kashyap 2016).²⁹

The revivalists were so successful in presenting a stridently ‘Assamese’ religion, led by a leader who followed the ideals of Indian nationalism, that today it is possible to claim that Sankaradeva the ‘nation-builder’ inspired people to become ‘good Assamese,’ notwithstanding that notions of ‘nation’ and ‘Assam’ were far away in fifteenth-century Kamrupia.

In his contribution to *Sattriya: Classical Dance of Assam* (Kothari 2013e) a landmark publication brought out by Marg in 2013, P J Mahanta gives a rare description of the other Samhatis of Assamese neo-Vaishnavism; however it is the values of the *nika samhati* which frame and pervade the narrative. Here he discusses the non-celibate *kala* and *brahma samhatis*:

Compared to *sattr*a of the celibate order [i.e. the *Nika sattr*a], the householder ones, being more exposed and open to the surrounding society [...] under the increasing pressure of domestic or family engagements, the practice of writing plays, composing devotional lyrics, and engagement with music, dance, theatre or visual arts and crafts became more normative and routine rather than impulsive and spontaneous. Dance as a distinct discipline independent of Ankiya Bhaona did not prosper much in these *sattr*a.’ (P J Mahanta 2013: 35-36).

The distancing from the *brahma samhati*, implied in the following paragraph, is more marked:

Some *sattr*a received bountiful patronage and material gains as well as unprecedented honour from the Ahom royalty, which resulted in a certain amount of subversion of the ideals of a liberal and humane ethos, social equality and spiritual upliftment of the depressed masses. (ibid: 32).

A photo showing the *namghar* (prayer hall) at Auniati, a *brahma samhati sattr*a on Majuli Island has the following caption: ‘Manikuta in the namghar at Auniati *Sattr*a where idols are placed for worship instead of the *Bhagavatapurana*.’ (ibid: 35). This contrasts with Kothari’s narrative earlier in the same volume that posits the worship of the *Bhagavatapurana* as one of Sankaradeva’s central tenets (ibid.: 12). On my two visits to Auniati, I found it to share a few common traits with UKS: the *bhakats* dress in white, practise celibacy and eat only vegetarian food. The *bhakats* of UKS, however, frequently spoke of the practices of Auniati in oppositional terms: they do not wear their

²⁹ Modi’s speech, which took place at the 85th Annual Conference of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, was in Hindi (Accessible online: Mango News 2016).

hair long, or cultivate performing arts to the same extent; they place far more significance on the annual Pal ceremony and the *Ras Leela* than at UKS, and their non-acknowledgment of Sankaradeva as a founder-guru means that the extensive performances and celebrations I witnessed at UKS during *bhadra* are not followed; idol worship is permitted and the *manikut*, instead of holding a holy Vaishnava text, is richly ornamented and features images of Krishna. It was also hinted that *brahma samhati* monasteries perform *puja*-like ceremonies for money, one of the very practices which, according to dominant narratives, Assamese Vaishnavism is supposed to have explicitly rejected.

The other three *samhatis* are judged in relation to ideals and practices valued by the *nika samhati* approach. The *nika samhati* itself is dwelt on at the most length, and its innovative yet authentic artistic pursuits are resoundingly praised, for example:

The most significant contribution to the performing arts, particularly to music and dance, came from the group of *sattras* belonging to the Nika Samhati [...] The Kamalabari *Sattras* and a few others belonging to the Nika Samhati set forth a new discipline [...] which brought novelty and splendour into the *sattras*-based music, dance and drama within the parameters. (ibid: 34)

Partly because of this dominance in the literature, and partly because *bhakats* from these *sattras* have been most active in the revival of their performance practices, many outsiders, tourists and foreign scholars first encounter Assamese Vaishnavism via the Kamalabari group. When Maheswar Neog gained support from the SNA to research the performing arts of Assam's *Sattras*, his main informants and the performers he toured were all from the Kamalabari group of *Sattras*, and it was his main counterpart, Maniram Dutta Muktiyar, 'the principal teacher and performer of Purani Kamalabari *Sattras* in Majuli' (S Goswami 2015: 157) who gained the very first SNA award for *Sattriya* in 1966. Neog also enjoyed 'generous support from the late Chandrahas Goswami, then *Sattradhikar* of Kamalabari *Sattras*' (157). The collection of Assamese music held in the British Library sound archives and, at the time of writing, are exhibited at the Horniman Museum was recorded by Rolf Killius at UKS. Michael Palin was brought to the same *sattras* while researching for his BBC documentary (Mills 2004) and book *Himalaya* (Palin 2004), it features in both. Though the 2016 British Museum exhibition 'Krishna in the Garden of Assam'—discussed in Chapter Four—engaged with monks from the *gristya* Chamaguri as well as UKS, it was the theology of the latter which was foregrounded in the exhibition (the narrative of this exhibition is analysed in Pope 2018). The organisers of the very first European tours by Assamese

dancing monks, Nadine Delpech and Mathias Coulangue, both worked with inmates of UKS, and Coulangue first came to Majuli Island to visit Notun Kamalabari Sattrā, after seeing performers from that monastery performing in Chennai.³⁰

Therefore, beyond Assam and India, the representation of Assamese Vaishnavism is dominated by the figure of the *nika samhati* monk, who is celibate, eschews ritual, earns his own money, prioritises artistic innovation as worship and traces his belief system to founder father Sankardeva. This thesis reproduces this bias by focusing on UKS, but because it is the engagement with mobility beyond the *sattrā* that is the focus of this study, it makes an ideal case study.

In the following section, I move one step closer to the institution where the *bhakats* of my study live, work, dance and worship, with a description of its physical layout and functioning. The information for this section was obtained during fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2016 at UKS, and interviews with Bhabananda Barbayan, Govinda Kalita, Jadumani Saikia and Nianjan Saikia, *bhakats* who live UKS, in August-September 2015. It draws from notes in my fieldnote diary.

Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā: physical description and functioning

UKS is located five kilometres north of Kamalabari Ghat, the largest ferry port on the Island of Majuli. The lane leading off the main road to its front gate is demarcated by a concrete archway bearing the name of the *sattrā* on the eastern side of the NLK road. Another kilometre along this lane, just before the bridge, stands three large blue-painted buildings. Adjoining the largest, painted with figures of dancing monks, *bhortals* and *khol* drums, is the main gate to the monastery. It bears the words ‘Sri Sri Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā: 1673’ and the same in Assamese.

³⁰ Interview with Mathias Coulangue, Paris, April 2016.



Figure 1: Gateway to UKS. Through the gate you can see end-on, the veranda of the southern *hati*. To the right is the side door to the auditorium

Visitors enter the *Sattrā* grounds through the gateway (Figure 1), also known as a *dalan* or *karapat*, located at the south-western corner. Leaving their shoes at the entrance, they find themselves surrounded on four sides by *hati*—rows of simple one-story detached houses, or *boha*—which form a rectangle. Along the front of each *hati* is a raised and covered terrace, where white shirts, *gamosa* (cotton scarves) and *dhoti* (large pieces of fabric worn around the waist and pulled up between the legs) hang out to dry. During the month of *bhadra* (mid-August to mid-September), chillis are spread out to dry out on the spotlessly clean terrace floor and *bhakat* toss rice on a large woven dish, allowing the wind to carry away the chaff. In front of one house, a monk makes white *pagris* (turbans) out of cardboard and fabric, ready for the ceremonies and performances which will take up the time and energy of the whole monastic community for the rest of the month. The centre of the *sattrā* precinct is dominated by a 120x60-foot building called a *namghar*, built on a slightly higher level than the *hati* and surrounded by banana trees. At the eastern end of the hall is the *manikut*, a sacred area which holds holy books seated on a *guru asana* (a low ‘altar’) and is administered by *bhakat* who have undergone the obligatory cleansing rituals. All the activities of the *namghar* are directed towards the *manikut*. The lower half of the northern and southern walls are made of rows of bars of about one metre high, and the upper half of wooden panelling. It is possible to enter the *namghar* either through small openings in these two walls or through the main entrance at the western end which leads out onto a large veranda,

where meetings and dance rehearsals take place. A covered walkway runs around the perimeter of the building on which friends, relatives and other devotees sit on the ground to witness special ceremonies and performances through the bars. Electric lights and fans hang from the corrugated-iron roof which extends over the hall, veranda and walkway. To the north of the *namghar* is a small pond, a covered parking bay for a van, and the monastery museum: a concrete structure built on stilts, which houses glass cases containing costumes, instruments, documents and precious objects. To the east of the *namghar* is the home of the *satradhikar*, the head of the *sattr*, which has a large veranda where the *satradikhar* meets devotees from outside the monastery.

Outside the main gate, there is a 120 x 33 foot auditorium, built in 1983. Situated just outside the monastery gates, the blue-painted concrete structure with a corrugated iron roof matches the monks' houses and two nearby shops selling groceries and local handicrafts and a room containing a flourmill, both of which are owned and managed by *bhakat* from UKS. During public events, audience members use the main entrance, located in the western wall (see Figure 2). The rest of the time – for rehearsals and teaching – monks and visitors use the small door located in the northern wall, close to the monastery gate. In common with the *namghar*, the main entrance is located at the western end, although, unlike the *namghar*, it is only used during public occasions.



Figure 2: Auditorium at Uttar Kamalabari Sattr, October 2016. Photo by Jadumani Saikia. The writing at the top reads 'Sanskritik Bhawan Established 1955 Uttar Kamalabari Sattr, Sankardeva Kristi Sangha'

When I was living at UKS in autumn 2015, there were 74 male *bhakat* living in the monastery, in 24 *boha*. A *boha* is a household organised like a nuclear family. Each has its own front door, kitchen, external washing facilities and shared finances. The oldest *bhakat* in each *boha*, known as the *barabhakat*, is regarded as the head of the household. When he dies, the next oldest member of the household becomes the

barabhakat. *Bhakat* of working age are responsible for providing financially for the whole family, including elders and children who are adopted into the monastery from around the age of five (some are much younger than this and are adopted as babies, and I heard of only one case where a child came in at the age of twelve). The most highly populated *boha* was that of the *satradhikar*, who shared his home with 11 other *bhakat* aged 3–78 years old and only one *boha* was occupied by a single tenant. Usually, *baris* housed 4–6 *bhakat* with 1–2 small children, 2–3 working adults and 1–3 non-working adults. In each *hati*, one household is considered the ‘*borboha*’, or head household, and the *barabhakat* of these four *borbohas* make up a four-strong committee who lead the other elders of the monastery in making decisions about spiritual and every-day matters within the *sattrā*, maintain the annual and daily religious ritual cycle and help to resolve disagreements amongst the *bhakats*.³¹

The *Sattradikhar* is the *sattrā*’s principal. He controls the central finances and has the final word on public-facing matters; for example, his blessing is required before *bhakat* are permitted to travel abroad. The *sattradikhar* lives a celibate life and eats and dresses in a similar way to the other *bhakat*, but he is not required to farm, perform household chores, or learn the performing arts. The previous *satradhikar* (Shri Kamalakanta Goswami) did not specify a successor, so when he died in 2000, according to Mousumi Sarma, UKS functioned without a *satradhikar* at its head for eighteen months (M Sarma 2015). Instead, ‘the *bhakat* decided that till they elect a new *Sattradhikar*, the management of the *Sattrā* will be run by a Anchalik Committee comprising *bhakat* as well as persons from the district administration.’ In March 2002, the current *sattradikhar* was appointed. He was ‘the third son of the *Satradhikar* of Brahmsari Bhagawati *Sattrā*, Nonoi, Nagaon.’

The *bhakat* have also formed a committee which monitors and controls performance practices beyond the *sattrā*. The president of the committee is Basanta and the secretary is Jadav. I had to pay a small fee to the committee for using the monastery auditorium for dance lessons, and when tourists pay for dance performances in the *namghar*, the money goes to the committee. If a dance troupe representing UKS performs outside the *sattrā*, they are required to pay 20% to the committee. When I first learned about the

³¹ According to Bhabananda Barbayan the *bharabhakat* of the head *boha* of the South *hati* has been traditionally considered the senior-most member of this 4-strong committee. His uncle held this position until his death in 2010, and, officially, Bhabananda should have inherited the role, but he has refused it on the grounds of being too young for the position. I also learned that there is currently no ‘head house’ of the eastern *hati* and many of the *bhakat* I asked about this system did not know of its existence, so I get the impression that it is a system which has lost significance.

committee, Govinda Saikia communicated a strong sense of pride in the institution, which he felt differentiated UKS from other *sattras* with strong performing traditions. Govinda implied that in other *sattras*, infighting and competitiveness had impeded the ability to form troupes and tour beyond the *sattras*. In fact, as I will explore below, there are tensions in UKS related to *bhakat* taking monastic performance practices beyond the *sattras*'s control, arising from such questions as who travels abroad, how performance fees should be distributed and whether it should be compulsory or forbidden to include the name 'Uttar Kamalabari Sattras' in marketing literature. However, the committee and the ethos of professionalism it has encouraged is certainly seen by many of the monks as helping UKS's reputation as a credible performing arts institution.

According to Bhabananda Barbayan, the population of UKS is stable. Though an increasing number of *bhakat* leave as adults rather than staying until the end of their lives, which is said to have been common earlier, families continue to dedicate their children to the monastery. Both the early leaving and the continued interest in dedicating children can be attributed to the growing opportunities to find work beyond the *sattras*. Table 1 implies that the population of the monastery has risen in recent years.³²

Year	Source of information	No. of <i>bhakat</i>
2007/8	Photo survey of UKS by French visitors	66+
2011	Mousumi Sarma (M Sarma 2015)	71
2015	Own survey	74

Young boys come to the *sattras* for various reasons: orphans who have lost both parents, children of single parents (widows, widowers and divorcees) who could not cope alone, the youngest of large families or, in some cases, children whose parents simply felt they would stand a better chance in life with a *sattras* education. A strong

³² My figures for 2007-8 are taken from a photographic collage made by two French visitors ('Zaza and Bouzou') and should only be taken as an indicator of the minimum population of the *sattras*. Some members of UKS may have been absent or unwilling to be photographed during their project. In my own photographic survey for which I photographed *bhakat* gathered together in family groups outside their respective *bohas*, two monks were absent, but I was given their names, so they are included in my figures for 2016.

relationship continues between many of the *bhakat* I got to know and their families. Govinda and his brother are very close: they perform as part of the same music troupe, and eat together regularly. During festivals or on important occasions such as *sattrā* examinations, *bhakats*' blood family members regularly turn up in their best clothes and watch performances in the *namghar* and are afterwards entertained in their boy's *boha*. The blood family are often asked permission by the *boha* heads before important decisions are made about a *bhakat*'s life. Bhabananda told me that when he was only sixteen, his uncle (also the *barabhakat* of his *boha* whom he refers to as his 'father') wanted him to become a *Barbayan*—a master of performing arts, who could train other *bhakat* in the *sattrā* and be considered as *adhiyapak*, or teacher. Usually such a role would not be assigned to someone so young, but Bhabananda had had an unusually broad and thorough training from his uncle who was head *adhiyapak* at the *sattrā*, versed in 'all departments: dance, drama, music and script writings and *namlogua*, and *patok*, manuscript recitations, and *bhagavad* [Gita] recitations.'³³ Bhabananda's uncle asked the boy's father if he could appoint him in his position, but his father worried that the role would interrupt his studies. Once Bhabananda had finished his 10th standard examinations, his uncle approached his father once again, and permission was granted. Only then did Bhabananda undertake the *sattrā* examination to earn him the position of *bargayan* at the age of 17. This story, along with other examples I heard during my time at UKS, made me aware of the continued influence of the family and life beyond the *sattrā*.

Another important link with the world beyond the *sattrā* for the *bhakat* is work. I was told that each *boha* is allocated two *bighas* (about 5000 m²) of land owned by the *sattrā* which they can use as they please. All households grow rice and graze cows on this land and many supplement their income with other jobs. Jagannath is a carpenter and Jadumani works in a hardware shop in Kamalabari and teaches in the local *tol* (Sanskrit school). Basanta has two large trucks parked behind his *boha*, which are used for freight, and his business interests bring a constant income to his household. He has funded the studies of a number of the *bhakat* in his and other *baris*. *Bhakats* have increasing access to government scholarships and private income from teaching monastic dance traditions outside the *sattrā*. The vast majority of students are middle class Indian women, either taught privately in their homes, in groups in schools or in

³³ Interview with Bhabananda April 22nd, 2017

‘Sattriya’ dance schools on Majuli island and elsewhere in Assam.³⁴ Far fewer male students are drawn from outside the *sattrā*. Some foreign students (all female except one, according to Govinda, who is probably the most active teacher of students from overseas) have had individual and group lessons in the auditorium. Wealthier households have been able to purchase more land than the *sattrā* allocation, and some have inherited land from previous occupants of their *boha*. Some farm this land themselves, but increasingly farming has been delegated to *Mishing* people, the largest tribe on the island.³⁵

Given the disparities in wealth, there is a visible difference between *boha*: some are freshly painted and have lights, fans and brick interior walls whilst others have woven bamboo partitions, no electric fans and older paintwork. All *boha*, however wealthy, are spartanly furnished: apart from beds and rush mats to sit on, the *bhakats*’ homes have no other furniture. When inside the *sattrā*, and to a large extent outside as well, *bhakat* dress in the same way: white dhoti, white shirt, white or red and white *gamosa* (scarf/sash/waistband). During performances and rituals they wear white turbans, pointed at the front. They are not allowed to cut their hair and they are punished through fines if they do so. Most *bhakat* have a room of their own, or share with only one other. The inhabitants of each *boha* are responsible for cleaning their home and the area outside. The *namghar* and other communal areas are cleaned daily by each house on a rotation system. A house of six people cleans for six days, a house of two people cleans for two days, and so on.

Ritual cleanliness is very important to the inhabitants of UKS, and inculcated at a very young age. *Bhakat* who have spent the day outside the *sattrā* cannot touch any other ‘clean’ *bhakat* until they have bathed and put on a fresh set of clothes. Touching cannot happen directly or ‘indirectly’ via an object, or the ‘clean’ *bhakat* will be ritually polluted. To pass a pencil, for example, the ‘clean’ *bhakat* holds out his cupped hands,

³⁴ The classical stream of ‘Sattriya’ and related scholarship will be discussed in Chapter Three.

³⁵ Whilst anthropologists are squeamish about using the notion of ‘tribal’ invented by our disciplinary forebears (see I Chatterjee 2016), the recognition of various ‘tribes’ by the Indian Government, and acceptance of the term by various ‘non-Aryan’ communities lends it continuing valence in India. With reservations, I therefore use the term ‘tribe’, along with my principal interviewees, to refer to the *Mishing* people. Whilst the monasteries are built on the highest land to avoid the annual erosion and floods, bamboo *ishing* huts are built everywhere on the island on high stilts and are repaired and rebuilt after each monsoon (there are two each year). *Mishing* practise a range of religious practices drawing from older Animist traditions, Christianity and/or Vaishnavism (according to Govinda, there has been a recent drive to ‘win’ back *Mishing* from Christianity, using similar techniques to the former missionaries, such as offering sanitation and education to *Mishing* children).

into which the ‘unclean’ *bhakat* drops the pencil. *Bhakat* cannot enter the household kitchen or the *namghar* until they are ‘clean’ and if they have travelled and eaten food that has not been prepared in their own kitchen, they have to undergo a period of fasting and a cleansing ceremony before they are considered ‘clean’. The *sattrā* is formally strictly vegetarian³⁶, and no food prepared outside should be brought in. No-one unclean can touch the washed garments hanging out to dry along the veranda, or they would have to be washed again. As a foreigner, I was never ‘clean’ so I could not touch or directly pass anything to people who had bathed and young *bhakat* would leap away from me whenever I entered the *sattrā* shouting ‘Don’t touch!’ to avoid having to bathe again. I heard a joke repeated in various non-monastic settings that the *bhakat* of *nika samhati* ‘wash the wood before they burn it’. The name of the sect or *samhati* to which UKS belongs – ‘*nika*’ – means ‘clean’.

Conclusion

According to D Nath, the *brahma samhati* was the most powerful and richest of the Assamese Vaishnavite sects under the Ahoms, who ruled most of the Brahmaputra valley from the early thirteenth century until British annexation in 1826 (Nath 2012). Though, owning the largest amount of land, *brahma samhati* remains the wealthiest sect, with the largest number of affiliates, during the ‘Neo-Vaishnavite’ revival, dominance shifted the *nika samhati* *sattras* whose doctrine appealed to the Assamese nation builders. Through personal connections, and the suitability of its doctrine to nationalist narratives, the *nika samhati* became representative of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism as a whole, for the Assamese literati, even though not all *sattrā* follow *nika samhati* practices.

When future scholars were looking to study Assamese Vaishnavism in its ‘purest form’, they would therefore, in a process of representational circularity, find it most perfectly realised in the Kamalabari group of *sattras*, on which their imagination of the religion—formed by nationalist writings—was based. Though Neog’s research covers a large number of *sattras*, he thus worked principally with monks from the Kamalabari Group, and his studies of performance practices are centred on their work. This prominence was then reproduced by scholars and dance critics from beyond Assam,

³⁶ In fact, fish is prepared inside the *sattrā* every day, though not everyone eats it.

such as Sunil Kothari, and foreigners interested in Assamese Vaishnavism followed suit.

As a result, the *bhakats* of UKS have witnessed a small but steady stream of scholars, ethnographers, dance students and tourists interested in Assamese Vaishnavism arriving on their doorstep and each has presented potential connections with scholarly and cultural institutions located in urban centres and foreign countries. As I demonstrate in Chapters Four and Six, Bhabananda Barbayan and Govinda Kalita have made the most of these encounters; casual visitors and scholars alike have later been responsible for organising foreign tours and facilitating yet more platforms and greater visibility for the *bhakats* of UKS. Because of their social capital, the middle class, ‘mobile’ practitioners of Sattriya dance are more likely to encounter cultural power brokers at parties, school functions and on holidays, but for the *bhakats* of most of Assam’s *sattras*, such chance encounters are rare. UKS’s access to such ‘channels of mobility’ has presented them with an unusual number of opportunities to travel and work collaboratively, when compared to *bhakats* of other orders. Working with this *sattrā*, rather than any other, has therefore presented me with a picture of particularly networked, dynamic internationalism which should not be generalised as a typical *sattrā* experience. Not all *sattrā* work in the same way as UKS.

Certainly, this history will have a bearing on the findings of this thesis. It was because UKS is such a connected monastery that I came here at all in 2012. Because of the particular routes I took to get to the monastery—on a search for saleable music cultures that could be presented to tourist audiences—I was more likely to find *bhakats* who were looking for opportunities to perform and work beyond the *sattrā* and UKS. If I write about *bhakats* as creative and outward-looking, because that is the type of *bhakat* that was likely to make himself visible to me.

Chapter Three: Mobilising *sattriya* arts nationally

The highest level of control over space and time is concretized simply as “fame,” that is, the fact that others, even others one has never met, consider one’s name important, one’s actions significant. (Graeber 2001:45)

[The nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 1983:49)

What is the value of having your art recognised at a national level? Every year, at the Sangeet Natak Academy Awards, over a hundred artists are awarded by the President of India for their contribution to the nation. It is a hugely sought-after accolade, and artists spend years working and campaigning for such recognition. Take the example of Janmajoy Saibabu, exponent of masked dance form Chhau from West Bengal. In 2019, after the SNA Awards, the website of news channel NDTV published an interview with Saibabu who said that national recognition had come after ‘a continuous struggle for 47 years.’

Of course the field is full of struggle but the joy of bringing your state's culture in front of people is beyond words. I am hopeful that after seeing the art of Chhau getting recognised more young people will come forward to keep it alive. (NDTV 2019)

National recognition involves labour, but is seen as a way of gaining visibility. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the case in Assam was no different: politicians, artists and critics alike worked long and hard to have *sattriya* arts recognised at a national level.

The rewards are rarely tangible. During over ten years of work with artists in Rajasthan, I have found many to be embittered when the fame and fortune promised by national awards did not lead to an increase in livelihood opportunities, or sustained income. Worse still, some awardees said that the short-lived fame of becoming an awardee led to jealousies amongst other artists, bookers becoming fearful that the awardee would now be too expensive, and looking to new talent, and extended family members thinking they were now rich, and expecting greater contributions to weddings

and other important family occasions.³⁷ What then, is the continued attraction of gaining recognition by national institutions?

By placing Graeber and Anderson's quotes together at the start of this chapter, I intend to demonstrate the relationship between the notion of 'fame' and that of the 'nation'. Both are realised through an encounter between an individual and an imaginary collective: people who one will never meet, but whose existence you are aware of. The *bhakats* of my study have a sense of the Indian nation, despite have very little in common with cosmopolitan Mumbai-ites or Rajasthani camel herders, but the dream of the unified nation, constructed in the 1930s, realised in 1947 and re-articulated by the central government ever since, creates a powerful sense of unity. Assam, however, has been a peripheral part of that imaginary collective. Thus the nation, for the Assamese, gives only a partial sense of belonging: the feeling that one belongs, but is a less important, marginal part of that collective. The Assamese may be very aware of their fellow citizens in Mumbai, through Bollywood, but there is a persistent and uncomfortable knowledge that those citizens in Mumbai do not know or care about the Assamese. Thus, national recognition, brings a sense of 'control over time and space'. Perhaps, with the recognition of 'Sattriya Dance', the name of Assam will be spoken at the very heart of the Indian nation and the Assamese people can overcome the uneasy feeling of non-belonging.

In many accounts of national revivals, the re-styling and re-contextualisation of art forms from local settings to urban, middle-class settings are characterised as 'appropriation'—the property of one community stolen by another. In the case of Sattriya dance, as I describe below, there is much in common between the nationalisation of *sattria* arts and the processes of cultural appropriation which have characterised earlier formations of Indian Classical Dances. Certainly, at the level of representation, *bhakat* performers have been side-lined and effaced in relation to the middle-class practitioners of Sattriya. However, to see this story as a process of appropriation would only tell a partial story: that of the middle class revivalists. Such an emphasis would re-inforce the same effacement of *bhakat* enterprise and capability enacted in recent revivalist narratives. In fact, *bhakat* performers have been proactive

³⁷ These comments are based on my observation of working with Manganiyar, Langa, Dholi, Kalbeliya, Nagarchi and Bhil artists as well as classical, pop and devotional musicians between 2008 and 2019. During this period I have helped to organise and attended concerts in a variety of festivals, public concert halls and private restaurants and clubs in Rajasthan, West Bengal, Assam and Delhi and gained an insight into the relative wealth of artists who had gained government recognition and those who had not.

participants in the nationalisation of their own art forms, as I will describe below. It is therefore useful to consider the creation of Sattriya from the arts of the *sattras* as an act of ‘giving’, as much as an act of ‘taking’. Doing so produces a more nuanced perspective of the relationship between the artist and the institutional frameworks and individuals which they encounter as they seek mobility. Returning Graeber’s notion of gift economics, it is possible to see that ‘giving away’ dance to the nation brings the *bhakats* creates a much wider sphere of influences (Graeber 2001:45). Whilst there is no immediate consideration of reciprocity, national recognition lead to *bhakats* receiving invitations for performances in Chennai, to inclusion on the list of artists maintained by the ICCR eligible for support with foreign tours (discussed in Chapter Four) and to the prestige brought locally by being responsible for putting Assam on the national map.

In addition to this, envisaging the engagement of *bhakats* with the revival of their art form in the terms of ‘gift’ giving, allows us to foreground their active participation in the process. For ‘social relations [...] to be created and maintained; all of this requires an investment of human time and energy, intelligence, concern.’ (ibid:45). This work is, according to Graeber’s reading of gift economics, what gives the dance its value.

To illustrate these processes, I discuss the mobilisation of *sattriya* arts for the national stage. I consider the processes and discourses which led to the formation of the nationally recognised ‘Major Indian Dance Form’ known as Sattriya Nirtya, or Sattriya Dance, and the recent popular representations of this new style. In doing so, I demonstrate how particular aesthetic values related to notions of ‘classicality’ became instituted within the Indian national cultural apparatus. I then show how *bhakat* practitioners consciously re-shape performance material to achieve visibility and mobility through such institutions. In foregrounding the practitioner perspective of the processes of classicisation, I draw inspiration from theory of value that recognises the perspective of the ‘giver’ (or producer) as well as that of the ‘receiver’ (or consumer) who has been over-emphasised in recent theories of value and exchange (Graeber 2001:31; 65). Such a perspective makes it possible to move away from national revivalist priorities usually foregrounded in accounts of the classicisation of Indian arts, and focus on the ways in which ‘giving’ dance to the middle classes and the nation has value for the *bhakats* themselves. A review of the recent literature on Sattriya Dance reveals a strong emphasis on nationally recognised tropes of classicality, leading to a representation of *bhakats* as insular and esoteric. Re-visiting this literature with a mind to the value of dance to its practitioners reveals a rather different history, one in which

dance is actively mobilised by the *bhakat* practitioners in order to bring people into relation.

Mobilising the *cali nach*

When I first encountered *sattriya* arts in UKS in April 2012, the *bhakats* who performed in the *namghar* on various occasions, told me that what they were doing was ‘Sattriya’ dance—a classically recognised form. I had never seen Sattriya, the nationally recognised classical genre which has emerged out of the form, so I was surprised, when I first saw a staged performance of ‘Sattriya Dance’ at the Bhawan Centre in London, in June 2015. To me, it looked nothing like what I had seen in the monastery. At UKS I had seen men in white *dhotis* presenting group performances of acrobatics or dancing with heavy drums slung across their shoulders; thirty young *bhakats* slowing rotating around the *namghar* making using small steps and beautiful ‘pure dance’ (non-mimetic) moves. At the Bhawan Centre, Shatarupa Chatterjee, though dressed similar to the costumes of *bhakats* performing in *bhaona*³⁸ performances I had seen, cut a rather different figure. It was not just the fact that she was a single female dancing on a proscenium arch stage—the dance itself was different. Segments were shorter and more varied, involving extensive use of *abhinaya* (mimetic movements, portraying dramatic action or the words of song). In the recorded music she was dancing too, I could hear the *tabla* and melodic instruments: a flute; a harmonium. If what I had seen in the monastery was Sattriya, then what was this? The programme notes did not help much. This, they said, was a 500-year-old dance from the *sattras* of Assam, developed by the poet-saint Sankaradeva.

When I travelled to Assam shortly afterwards and started dance lessons with Govinda in the auditorium of UKS, I encountered the same disjuncture—all the more curious because no one seemed to be acknowledging it. Govinda told me that he would teach me the *cali nach*, but when I watched the monks perform a ‘*cali nach*’ in the monastery, it seemed utterly different. ‘My’ dance was thirteen minutes long, and ‘theirs’ was forty-five minutes. There were only a few minutes of the *namghar* dance which bore resemblance to some of the *cali nach* that I had learned; the rest of ‘my’ version contained material that did not feature at all in ‘theirs’. There were three things about this which fascinated me about this. Firstly, it proved to me that ‘Sattriya

³⁸ Vaishnavite dramas written by Sankaradeva and performed by Assamese *bhakats* and villagers (see Chapter Five for more details).

Dance’—the official, government promoted form that women were learning outside the *sattras* was actually substantially different from the practices in the monasteries on which it is nominally based, despite the claims of continuity, like that in Chatterjee’s programme notes. Secondly, it was clear that the *bhakats* themselves choreograph, teach and—as I later discovered—perform this different form, though never in the *namghar*. Thirdly, and this was the greatest puzzle of all: *no one was acknowledging that there was any difference*. What were the aesthetic basis for the changes that were going into creating this nationally acceptable, stage-ready form? And why was it so difficult, or undesirable, to talk about it?

In this chapter, I take a close look at the *cali nach* that I learned, which I refer to as the ‘auditorium version’, and compare it to the ‘*namghar* version’, performed by *bhakats* from UKS. Through this comparison, it is possible to see some of the choices which are made by choreographers when creating a version of the performance practices of the *sattras* which will have value at a national level. Having established what these differences are, I then consider why these particular aesthetic choices hold more value for the gatekeepers of what should be considered an ‘Indian National Dance’. Why does including *abhinaya* make something more national? Why does shortening and re-shaping a dance make it more ‘classical’? To understand these connections, it is necessary to look back to the 1930s and 40s and think about the formation of the institutions which continue to decide what constitutes the category of Indian Dance: notably the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the ICCR. Through this discussion of the values gatekeepers of culture, it also becomes clearer why it is so difficult to articulate the shifts and changes which occur in re-packaging the dance for a national stage. Articulations of historical continuity are themselves valued by the gatekeepers of national culture.

In the second part of this chapter, I then demonstrate how the aesthetic values embodied in the auditorium version of the *cali nach* are expressed in scholarly representations of *sattras* arts, such as a recent Marg publication on Sattriya (Kothari 2013), and in the knowledge surrounding Sattriya dance expressed on dancers’ websites and in programme notes. In doing so, I demonstrate how writing that seeks to emphasise the national value of the *sattras* arts, including articulations of continuity, works in various ways to efface the creative contribution of the *bhakat* practitioners and to represent them as oppositional to the recent developments in the story of *sattras* arts, rather than energetically involved in it.

By re-visiting the history of *sattrā* arts, not with an eye to prove their classicality (and thus value at a national level), but to understand what value they have held for the *bhakats* themselves, a different story emerges, and one which helps us to understand the mobilisation practices of *bhakats* to this day. *Sattrā* arts have long been valued by the monasteries for their multivalence and their ability to attract highly differentiated audiences. Rather than seeing the recent classicisation of monastic practice in oppositional terms to the values of the *bhakat* practitioners, it therefore starts to become possible to understand it in terms of continuity. This helps to explain the ease and enthusiasm with which the *bhakats* of my study have participated in the recent classicisation of their dance form.

i. ‘*Namghar* version’

Definitions of the *cali nach* in scholarly articles and website entries all refer to a three-part dance practiced in the *namghar*. For example, in his 2016 article, Bhabananda Barbayan’s structural description refers only to the *cali* in its ‘ritualistic daily practice’ format:

Presently the *cālī* dance that is regularly performed as a ritualistic daily practice item in the *Kamalābārī* group of *Satras* is of two kinds- *suddha cālī* or pure *cālī* and *rajāgharīyā cālī* of the royal house. [...] Both these *cālīs* are performed in three stages- *rāmdāni*, *gītār* and *melā nāc*. (Barbayan 2016:72)

This description of the *cali* as three parts (*rāmdāni*, *gītār* and *melā*) is echoed by Kothari (2013c:80), corresponds to the transcription of a *cali nach* in Neog and Changakati (1962), and matches performances of *cali nach* which I observed in the UKS *namghar* in August 2015. I do not enter into a detailed transcription of this dance because this format of *cali nach* is well-documented and recognised. Instead I draw attention to selective elements which show how it differs from the example of an ‘auditorium’ version that I was taught, described in 3.1.2. Although most Sattriya dancers would be familiar with the latter format, there has been, as yet no written documentation of this type of re-organisation of *sattriya* performance practices.

I witnessed two performances of *cali nach* while I was in the monastery, one on 27th August 2015 and the other on September 6th. Both were morning performances held in the *namghar*, as part of the *trithi* ‘celebrations’; the four-day commemoration of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva the founders of Vaishnavism (according to members of

the *nika samhati*³⁹) and the founder of UKS Bordula Padma Ata. These celebrations, involving dance and drama performances by all the members of the *sattrā*, take place during the month of *bhog* (mid August to mid September). The *cali nach* was preceded by a *gayān bayān* performance (dancing and singing with *khol* drums: see Chapter Five) and prayers. It was followed by lunch, and then other dance performance (different on both occasions) which continued late into the evening.

On both occasions, the dance was performed by four young male *bhakats* (aged between 14 and 20 years old) dressed in white floor-length skirts, black blouses and woven sashes and *gamosas*—ornate red and white silk scarves. They were accompanied by five singers: two playing *khol* (double-ended wooden drums played with the hands) and three playing *tāls* (pairs of small brass bells). The dancers entered the *namghar* through a door in the northern wall, and prostrated themselves towards the *guru asana* (see Chapter Two for a description of the layout of the *namghar* and a description of the *guru asana*). They remained there whilst the musicians played and sang prayers to god. They then rose up and performed the *cali nach* in three parts, taking a total of forty-five minutes. The first *cali nach* had ramdani five, and the second (on September 6th) had ramdani eight, and precisely followed the transcription of the rhythms given in the *cali nach* eight transcribed in Neog and Changakati (1962). The dancing was all performed towards the *guru asana*, and there was absolutely no *abhinaya* (mimetic dancing).

ii. ‘Auditorium version’

I was taught a rather different version of the ‘*cali nach*’ in the monastery-owned auditorium which lies just beyond the monastery gates. Purpose-built in 1983, the auditorium is reserved for rehearsals, teaching and performances of *sattrā* arts not considered part of the ‘ritual tradition’.⁴⁰ The method that Govinda used to teach me was to first make me note down the *bol*—the rhythmic syllables which correspond to the sound of the *khol* drum, that is the key accompanying instrument in *sattrā* arts—of a short section. He would then teach me the corresponding dance section, first counting “one, two, three...” and then, once I had mastered the step, he would repeat the *bol*. For example, the first part of the dance, repeated four times goes:

Tay tay tay tat dhina dhina

³⁹ See Chapter Two for a discussion of the different *samhatas* (sects) of Assamese Vaishnavism.

⁴⁰ I had observed this over time and it was explicitly confirmed by Bhabananda in a WhatsApp exchange in December 2015.

Dhey tata khiti dhao tati tata khiti dhao

He would then encourage me to speak these bol as I danced and he would play the corresponding rhythm on the *khol*.

Slowly, over six weeks of daily practice, we pieced together the following 13-minute ‘*cali nach*’:

1. Short ‘pure dance’ (i.e. non mimetic dance) introduction
2. Song in praise of Krishna, ‘Hey Krishna’ interpreted through *abhinaya*
3. Longer section of ‘pure dance’
4. Four verses of a borgeet song, interpreted through *abhinaya* and interspersed with dance-drama and pure dance, as follows:
 - i. Verse 1 with *abhinaya*
 - ii. Dance-mime enactment of Putana Bodh
 - iii. Verse 2 with *abhinaya*
 - iv. Pure dance interlude
 - v. Verse 3 with *abhinaya*
 - vi. Pure dance interlude
 - vii. Dance-mime enactment of Kaliya Damon
 - viii. Pure dance interlude (Krishna dances on the hood of the demon)
 - viii. Verse 4 with *abhinaya*
5. Pure dance finale

When I had learned the entire piece, my husband was invited to come and film me dance and I was accompanied by three *bhakat* musicians: Nilanjan on flute, Jadumani on *khol* and Govinda singing and playing the harmonium.

During lessons, Govinda spoke of a notional ‘audience’ during our lessons and imagined various public events I could perform at. At one point we discussed having a costume made for this purpose so that I might perform with Govinda’s dance troupe. In keeping with this imagined ‘stage’ presentation that this ‘auditorium *cali nach*’ was being prepared for, Govinda had choreographed various entries and exits to a notional ‘off-stage’ between danced sections.

iii. Summary of differences

In the following two tables, I summarise the differences between the two versions of *cali nach* ('*namghar*' and 'auditorium') according to two bases of comparison which I have named 'contextual' and 'textual'. The boundary between these two bases is in fact difficult to differentiate, and depends on whether the definition of the 'dance' being analysed is limited to the string of dance moves, or the entire performance. The number of dancers, for example, could be construed as a 'contextual' or 'textual', depending on the size of the frame of reference. I have kept my definition of 'textual differences', for the purpose of this analysis, to the unfolding of dance moves this choice of perspective acknowledged. In the first table I therefore limit my comparison to body movement, and describe the provenance of material that was introduced into the 'auditorium version' wherever this comes from beyond the *namghar cali nach* vocabulary. Contextual differences describe a selection of factors beyond the dancers' moving body.

'Textual' Differences

Auditorium <i>cali nach</i>	<i>Namghar cali nach</i>
Dancer starts from notion 'off stage'	Dancers start from centre of <i>namghar</i>
1. Short pure dance introduction Opens with a 'run' onto and around the stage using dance steps adapted from a <i>mela</i> section from another <i>cali nach</i> and performed to a rhythm called <i>dhap</i> , taken from <i>gayan-bayan</i> sequence, another <i>namghar</i> performance practice. Includes <i>prakriti pak</i> the 'feminine' spin. ⁴¹	Opens with a slow, floor-based, invocation to God accompanied by <i>thukni taal</i>
2. Song in praise of Krishna Next I perform <i>abhinaya</i> , describing through gesture the words of the song <i>Hey Krishno, Basudevo</i> . This song comes from the repertoire of	No <i>abhinaya</i>

⁴¹ Meernanda Barthakur is pictured performing a *prakriti pak* in Kothari: 2013: 59, plate 21. In this turn, the hands are held in *hordenko hasta*. As the dancer twirls around in an anti-clockwise direction, the right hand traces an anti-clockwise circle away from the body, starting and ending at the centre of the chest. The left hand traces an anti-clockwise circle above the head.

<p>songs in praise of Krishna sung in the <i>namghar</i> but not accompanied by dance. The gestures (called '<i>hastas</i>') used in the <i>abhinaya</i> section are based on those used in <i>oja pāli</i> (see p. 127 and p. 178).</p>	
<p>3. Longer section of pure dance</p> <p>I perform a short extract of <i>ramdani</i> eight exactly as the <i>namghar</i> versions</p>	<p><i>Ramdani</i> (pure dance section)</p>
<p>4. Four verses of a <i>borgeet</i> song, interpreted through <i>abhinaya</i> and interspersed with dance-drama and pure dance</p> <p>While a solo singer sings the <i>borgeet</i> '<i>Arre Haro Kiriti</i>' to <i>ek taali</i> I interpret the words with <i>hastas</i> (4i, 4iii, 4v and 4viv) Between verses, I perform two sections of pure dance, taken from a <i>geetor nach</i> of the <i>namghar cali nach</i> (4iv and 4vi) and two sections of semi-structured danced narration (4ii and 4vii) (see below).</p>	<p><i>Geetor nach</i>. A section of pure dance while the <i>gayans</i> sing a <i>borgeet</i> (a devotional song attributed to Sankaradeva)</p>
<p>4 ii and 4 vii - Narrative Dances</p> <p>In the first, piece of narration, I enact the story of 'Putana Bodh'⁴² In the second, I enact the story of 'Kaliya Daman'⁴³. This section ends with a short piece of dance (viii) depicting Krishna dancing on the hood of Kaliya which is extracted from yet another part of the monastic repertoire known as <i>Nadu Bhangi</i> and danced to <i>shruta taal</i></p>	<p>No narrative dances</p>
<p>5. Pure dance finale</p> <p>To finish, I perform a 1-minute extract of a <i>mela</i> sequence</p>	<p><i>Mela</i> sequences usually take up to 15 minutes.</p>

'Contextual' differences

⁴² Baby Krishna kills the demoness Putana (a story from the Tenth Canto of the Bhagavata Purana, a medieval Sanskrit treatise of extreme importance to Vaishnavite devotees).

⁴³ Adult Krishna subdues the snake demon Kaliya (also from the Tenth Canto of the Bhagavata Purana).

	Auditorium <i>cali nach</i>	<i>Namghar cali nach</i>
Duration	13 minutes	45 minutes
Place/ intended place	Auditorium/ Stage	<i>Namghar</i>
Audience/ implied audience	Concert audience	Other devotees; Lord Krishna
Direction	Towards ‘audience’ at east end of building	Towards ‘manikut’ at east end of building
Number of dancers	Solo	Four dancers

iv. Analysis of differences: making *sattr* arts into ‘Indian classical Dance’

In the following section, I look at three changes made to the *chali nach* in relation to the broader historical discourses which have framed what ‘classical dance’ should look like in India.

1. *Abhinaya* and the influence of Bharatnatyam

In the era shortly before and after Indian Independence (1947) nationalist leaders and cultural experts worked to centralise and develop India’s plethora of art forms. This involved an intense period of re-discovery, selection and revival (Walker 2014a). Shah reminds us that, presenting the new nation as a player to be taken seriously on a global stage, with arts and cultures of equal or superior value to those of other nation-states, India’s new leaders founded the Ministry of Culture and, soon afterwards, the ICCR and the SNA (Shah 2002:128). Shah describes India’s recognition of first four, then seven ‘classical dances’ identified and championed by the new nation state:

Upon its establishment in 1952 in New Delhi, the National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama (Sangeet Natak Akademi) affirmatively declared four regional artistic forms as "classical dances of India": Bharatanatyam of Tamil Nadu, Kathak from northern India, Manipuri of Manipur, and Kathakali of Kerala. However, following the successful example of the revived Bharatanatyam, other lesser-known regional dance traditions, such as Kuchipudi from Andhra, Odissi from Orissa, and Mohiniattam from Kerala state, were also revived in the mid-1950s and 1960s and reconstructed on the basis of the descriptions provided in the *Natyasastra*, other vernacular

treatises, and palm-leaf manuscripts. It was then that the National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama recognized these three regional dances as "classical," eventually raising the official score to a total of seven classical dances in India. (ibid.: 128).

The way that the earliest dances to be recognised as 'classical' were reconstructed and revived, in particular Bharatnatyam—which translates as the 'dance of India'—became the model process for all subsequent national dance forms:

Bharatanatyam signified the epitome that would eventually be modeled by other regional dances in their claim to be recognized as "classical" and therefore national. (Shah 2002: 130).

The discourses which grew during these early classical dance revivals crystallised into an ideal notion of what an 'Indian Classical Dance' ought to be.

This modelling on Bharatnatyam is evident in the 'auditorium' *cali nach* in two main ways. Firstly, through the introduction of *abhinaya*—the mimetic component which does not feature in *namghar* version—shown in sections 2 and 4 in the table above—but which is considered a significant element in this earlier example of an Indian classical dance. The second way is in its fusing together of various elements drawn from different parts of the *sattrā* repertoire, such as the inclusion of *Nadu Bhangi* dance at the end of the Kaliya Daman performance. In an interview with my teacher Govinda, I asked why this version contained *abhinaya* sections, and other elements which were not part of a *namghar cali nach* and Govinda explicitly referenced Bharatnatyam:

Not only me, all monks, many people decide. I go to France, thinking, writing, this will go inside, this will not go.⁴⁴ Sankaradeva writing 'Hey Krishna' – I keep it inside. In Bharatnatyam, no pure dance, only *abhinaya*. Temple dance is different – only prayer; it's God. No people coming. They will be bored. Auditorium dance, many people see. These people don't like temple dance.⁴⁵

In his perspective, the 'people' he imagines watching the newer version would not find value in the choreographies of the *namghar*; they would be 'bored'. In order to make the dance more attractive and interesting to this imagined audience, *abhinaya* and more

⁴⁴ Govinda has made a number of trips to France, along with Bhabananda Barbayan and varying numbers of monastic colleagues, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. Here Govinda refers to a residency that a group of *bhakats* undertook in 2008 in l'Abbaye de Sylvanes, where they worked to create 'stage-ready' dance pieces for the French tour.

⁴⁵ This quotation is noted in my fieldnote diary shortly after my lesson on 21st August, 2016.

variety must be introduced, like in Bharatnatyam. The change from a group of male dancers to a single female dancer is also indicative of a change which makes the form more 'like' Bharatnatyam: a solo female dance form.

2. Becoming 'stage ready' and the notion of 'Democratisation'

The imagined audience, as expressed by Govinda as people who 'don't like temple dance' demonstrates a notion of 'classicality' which imagines an audience with a certain set of aesthetic values, distinct from those of the temple. Textual and contextual changes are introduced in order to make the dance performable on a proscenium arch stage, for a modern secular audience. For example, where the *namghar* version opens with an invocation to God at the very point where the rest of the dance will continue, the auditorium version starts at a point diagonally behind and to the left of where the rest of the dance will be performed, allowing the dancer to move between a notional off stage to centre stage. Another change which makes the 'auditorium' version 'stage ready' is in its direction of performance, which is towards the viewer, unlike performances of *cali nach* in the *namghar* which are directed towards the eastern end where a holy book of poetry by Sankaradeva is enthroned on the *guru asana* in the *manikut*, the holiest part of the *namghar* at its eastern end. Within the very choreography of the 'auditorium' dance, therefore, it becomes possible to see that it is deemed self-evident that a dance that is to be accepted as a 'classical' dance must be one that is formulated for a proscenium arch stage.

Where has this assumption come from? Turning again the history of the foundation of India's cultural institutions, it is possible to see that having dances performed in modern secular spaces, beyond the court and the temple, was an important part of a conscious effort to 'democratise' Indian arts, i.e. to free art forms from the monopoly of certain communities, religions and regions and making them available to 'all' (Indians). However, whilst the institutionalisation of performing arts in academies, and their relocation from private salons to public auditoriums opened art forms to new audiences and practitioners, as Walker, Soneji, and Morcom have demonstrated, these new audiences and practitioners were often quite monocultural. They excluded all but the middle and upper classes, including even the original practitioners. According to Janaki Bakhle, for the musical reformer Bhatkhande, this was a very conscious position:

Classicization, [...] was instrumental and went hand in hand with nationalization. The gharanas could not fit the bill—not because they were Muslim, but because they were disorderly. Moreover,

they were not public institutions. Access to them was restricted, there was no public arena of discussion and debate, and instruction was selective. The reason Muslim musicians had to be excluded was not simply because they were Muslim, but because they, like the Kshetra Mohan Goswamis and Ganeshilal Chaubes, did not possess the knowledge to create and sustain a modern academy of classical music. The academy had to be built from scratch, which Bhatkhande recognized in his comment that “Hindustani music is only just being classicized.” The *ustads* and *gharanas* could not serve the academy’s needs (Bakhle 2005: 124).

Bhatkhande worked actively to democratise the knowledge of Hindustani classical music beyond the *khandan* in western-style institutions rather than let it languish in the hands of *pundits* and *ustads* he denigrated as protectionist.

3. Narrative Dance and the *Natyasastra*⁴⁶

The third aspect of the translation of the *cali nach* that can be understood in relation to early nationalist discourses is the introduction of narrative dances at 4 ii and 4 vii: the danced depictions of ‘Putana Bodh’ (in which the infant Krishna’s is kidnapped by Putana and then he kills her) and ‘Kaliya Daman’ (in which the snake demon Kaliya poisons Krishna’s friends and then Krishna fights and bring the snake under his power). Although danced depictions of dramatic events is an important part of the Assamese Vaishnavite dramatic form *bhaona*, such danced drama is not part of the *chali nach*. Its insertion into a dance in order to mobilise it at a national level is intended to meet a definition of classicality which values an ancient treatise on dramaturgy called the *Natyashastra*, which states that dance consists of three elements: *natya*, *nrithya*, and *nrtta*, a typical definition of which is given by Meduri:

Natya corresponds to drama, *nrithya* to mime performed to song and music, and *nrtta* to pure dance that employs sculptural poses and body movements that do not refer back to narrative (1988:3).

The *namghar* version of the *chali nach*, according to this schema, only satisfies one of the three necessary components of dance according to this ancient text, and that is *nrtta*. In order to become true dance, it must contain *natya* (in this case satisfied by the insertion of the Kaliya Daman and Putana Bodh) and *nrithya* (satisfied by the use of *abhinaya* discussed above).

⁴⁶ The *Natyasastra* is ‘a treatise on Indian dramaturgy, speculated to have been written between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.’ (Shah 2002: 126)

To understand how this *description* of dance in an ancient treatise became *proscriptive* of how the *bhakats* worked to create a piece of dance that will be valued at a national level, it is necessary to re-visit the construction of India's national self-imaginary. Walker emphasises that the new nation builders were profoundly influenced by the studies of colonial scholar-administrators—the 'orientalists' (Said 1995)—that were to become the bedrock of subsequent scholarship on Indian arts (Walker 2014a). Orientalism, Walker reminds us, is 'simultaneously a field of study, a philosophy relating present and past, and a policy of governance.' (Walker 2014a: 11). An important orientalist organisation, the Asiatic Society, founded in Bengal by the British Governor of India, Warren Hastings in the year 1784, was responsible for bringing to light ancient texts and manuals in Sanskrit and vernacular languages. One of their 'prized retrievals,' (Shah 2002: 129), was the *Natyasastra* 'an ancient treatise on Indian dramaturgy speculated to have been written between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.' (ibid). Orientalist scholars like William Jones made unfavourable comparisons between the performance practices they saw around them and the idealised vision of antiquity they found in these treatises.

Chief among Jones's notions was the observation that, although evidence could be found in the treatises he translated of a sophisticated musical system, this practice seemed to him 'almost wholly lost' (Jones 1784 in Tagore 1882: 155–6). This assertion, that performing arts in contemporary India were only a shadow of those practised in the ancient past, was reiterated by William Stafford (Stafford 1830 in Tagore 1882: 220) and further supported by Augustus Willard in a statement about the 'subsequent depravity of music since the Mahomedan conquest.' (Willard 1834 in Tagore 1882: 28). (Walker 2014a: 11)

Thus, the dance forms which were to become prized as 'Major Dance Forms of India' were reconstructed along the lines of ancient treatises which seemed to represent an long-past golden age of 'pure Hindoo culture.' (Walker 2014a: 11), which the nation builders saw as an appropriate history for the new Indian Nation.

Representations of Sattriya and National Values

The sorts of values which I have identified in the translation of the *chali nach* from the *namghar* to the national stage are also writ large in recent revivalist scholarship on Sattriya dance. This is particularly true of a definitive book about Sattriya published by Marg in 2013, *Sattriya Dance: Classical Dance of Assam* (henceforth *SCDA*), which clearly seeks to present the *sattria* arts in such a way that they will be valued as

‘classical’. Contributors discuss formal aspects of the art forms they consider to fit under the term ‘Sattriya’ and provide information about the *sattras* institutions from which they are derived. Their accounts give glimpses of individuals, institutions and events involved in re-positioning *sattras* arts over the past century. *SCDA* is edited by Sunil Kothari, a defining figure in the Indian dance world.⁴⁷ Published by Marg, edited by Sunil Kothari, sponsored by the SNA⁴⁸ and heavily based on the work of the prolific scholar of Assamese culture, Maheswar Neog, *SCDA* represents the dominant narrative surrounding Sattriya dance.

In this section, I provide a critical analysis of this scholarship, considering the preoccupations that are evident in representations of Sattriya. In the final part of the Chapter I then revisit the assertions point by point, demonstrating that, by foregrounding *bhakats*’ values and motivations rather than nationalist preoccupations, a very different history emerges.

In *SCDA* and closely related literature surrounding the new genre of Sattriya dance, four clear themes emerge: the first is (i) that *bhakats* are made out to be inward-facing traditionalists, adverse to change and so focused on devotion that they are not interested in creating audience-pleasing, aesthetic art. The second is (ii) that *sattriya* arts have a pure and uninterrupted history with no outside influence or new material incorporated before or after the time of Sankaradeva. The third is (iii) that *sattriya* arts are ‘shastric’, i.e. they include material and grammar that is comparable with those described in ancient Sanskrit treatises on art and dance, like the *Natyasastra*. These three representational tendencies reflect a desire to position *sattriya* arts in the Indian imaginary as ‘classical’ and also, as with the revivalist rhetoric discussed above to justify outsider intervention. The fourth theme I identified in this literature is (iv) a silence around the gap between the modern form of ‘Sattriya’ and the performance practices of the *sattras*, despite the fact that what is danced on the proscenium stage looks drastically different from what happens in the monasteries. There are important

⁴⁷ Kothari received the SNA award in 1995 for overall contribution to Indian classical dance and was awarded the Padma Sri in 2001. He has written and edited eighteen books on Indian dances and is an advisor and regular contributor to *Nartanam*, India’s largest circulation dance magazine. He has also been a member of the Executive Committee of International Dance Council (UNESCO), Paris, Assistant Secretary of the SNA for dance; and a member of the Advisory Committee for the ICCR and written articles on dance for The Times of India group of publications since the 1960s. He is a foreign correspondent for *Dance Magazine*, New York. This biographical information comes from the cover sleeve of Kothari and Pasricha 2001 and is supplemented with details from websites of SNA and ICCR.

⁴⁸ The book received 50,000 rupees towards publication costs from the SNA (SNA 2014).

motivations behind projecting continuity: if ‘Sattriya dance’ was represented as only a few years old, it would lose legitimacy as a classical dance form. It would seem to deny credit to the *sattras* from where much of the material Sattriya dancers perform is drawn. The refusal of the moniker ‘revival’ in relation to the recent changes to *sattri* arts is part of this desire for continuity.

i. ‘Die-hard traditionalists’

Literature around Sattriya dance emphasises a dichotomy between the figures of the ‘traditionalist monk’ (from the monasteries) and ‘pioneering modernist’ (from the cities) in the story of Sattriya’s origins. In his introduction to *SCDA* Kothari locates monastic dance practices firmly within the monastery walls:

Sattriya dances had been preserved, practiced and performed in *sattras* all over Assam for the past 500 years, but they were not presented outside the *sattras*. During the early 1930s, a few pioneering artists got together in an attempt to present Sattriya dances in non-*sattri* locations, in order to preserve and propagate the dance form in Assam. [...] [I]n these early years performances of Ankiya Bhaona were still not held outside the *sattras*. (Kothari 2013b: 11-13)

Any comments about the aesthetic value or creativity of *sattriya* arts are attributed to their post-revival form, as if the recent interventions which have caused Sattriya to move ‘from the monasteries to the metropolitan stage’ has been accompanied by a process of aestheticisation. For example, Kothari states: ‘Retaining its basic core of *bhakti*, Sattriya dance has metamorphosed into a form with high aesthetic appeal’ (Kothari 2013e: flycover).

This opposition between a ‘ritual’ monastic practice and an audience-orientated art form ‘for the public’ and ‘outside the *sattras*’, is echoed by Leela Venkataraman, celebrated dance writer and long-term advisor to *Nartanam* in her contribution to their special edition on *Sattriya*:

While all classical Indian dance traditions have traveled from the temple to the proscenium arena, Sattriya’s is a rare instance where its spiritual *sattri* tradition continues to exist as ritual in its all male form, while a parallel manifestation rendered by dancers both male and female outside the *sattras* is establishing a large presence as a performing art form for the public (Venkataraman 2013: 168).

Ghanakanta Bora also describes a dance form with a history of no audience.

Different dance numbers were performed by monks belonging to both celibate and domestic orders in *sattras* as part of their ritualistic calendar, more as offerings of devotional prayer than as presentation of an art form. Moreover there were hardly any spectators to enjoy such performances other than the monks or performers themselves. (G Bora 2013: 81)

Such statements have become part of the received wisdom about Sattriya dance. An online article announcing a performance of *bhakats* from UKS at Drexel University in the USA in March 2018 states: ‘Sattriya has historically been a hidden form of dance.’ (Drexel Now 2018).

In his essay that came out in *Nartanam* a few months after the publication of *SCDA*, Kothari portrays a deep and irredeemable divide between devotionally-orientated monks and stage-orientated artists:

In *sattras* the monks performed not for an audience, but as part of ritual and worship. [...] Though they can bring intense and deep feelings of *bhakti* in their performances, the varied audience would want something more and entertaining [sic]. Obviously there is a division among the traditional performers from *sattras* and those who learn from gurus in the cities and perform on the stage. These die-hard traditionalists will not accept performances by the younger generation. The schism will remain. (Kothari: 2013d: 176)

In fact, many stage performers—both *bhakats* and ‘those who learn from gurus in the cities’—are trained by *adhyapakas* (traditional teachers) at UKS, but such flexible ‘border-crossing’ simply does not suit the narrative. By presenting the original culture-bearers as esoteric or elitist, revivalists justify their own interventions. They also create a dominant narrative around ‘Sattriya’ which sets up a dichotomy between a ‘traditional’ past for the performance practices of the Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam and a dynamic, creative present for the dance form it has now become.

ii. Origins in 15th-century *bhaona* with no outside influence before or since

Some proportion of the repertoire of ‘Sattriya’ has been and is still performed in the context of a theatre form known as *bhaona* or *ankiya nat*, which emerged in Assam during the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century. These dramatic performances are understood to have been cultivated by monks in Assamese Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries since the time of the founder Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva and his chief disciple Madhavadeva wrote a number of *bhaona* plays, also known as *Ankiya Nat*, which are one-act dance-dramas that describe episodes from the lives of Krishna and

Ram. The drama proper is preceded by lengthy preliminaries, which include song, group dance and collective drumming. Within the drama are solo and duet dances for specific characters. Another strong tendency of the literature surrounding Sattriya is to emphasise these theatrical origins. For example, according to Sunil Kothari, ‘Sattriya dances emerge from the format of dance-drama’ (Kothari 2013d: 174) and J Mahanta ‘drama, particularly the *Ankiya Nat*, became the seed bed of Sattriya dances of Assam’ (J Mahanta 2013: 57).

Such statements give authority to Sankaradeva or Madhavadeva, who are credited with having written all the *Ankiya Bhaona* plays. Identifying the poet-saints as sole authors of the *sattriya* arts allows the dance to be claimed as quintessentially Assamese, which suits those seeking classical recognition to raise the profile and prestige of Assam (see Chapter Two). At the same time, representing Sattriya as rooted in *bhaona* allows for easy comparison with other Indian classical dance forms rooted in theatre, thereby lending weight to the narratives discussed in Chapter Two which work to locate Assamese culture in South Asian history.

Xatriya dance began primarily as an accompaniment to Sankaradeva’s *ankiya nat*. Sankaradeva drew elements from various folk and ethnic traditions around him, and refined them to create his dance form. Like *Kuchipudi* and *Kathakali*, *xatriya* dance is born of the dramatic tradition, the characters use dance movements to illustrate various *bhavas* (sentiment) and *rasas* (flavour) (B Phukan 2010: 104).

This statement reveals that while other, occasionally non-Vaishnava and non-Indian elements can be identified in *sattriya* arts, filtering all outside influences through *ankiya nat* neutralises their alterity and allows their interpretation as ‘refined’ symbols of classicality. Tracing Sattriya to *bhaona* and by extension to Sankaradeva also confirms a history of inclusion in a broader Indian national history.

iii. Sattriya arts are ‘*shastric*’

The title, layout and arguments presented in *SCDA* (Kothari 2013e) are all geared to convince readers of the validity of Sattriya’s position as a ‘classical’ art. Eight of the sixteen chapters are grouped under the terms ‘*Nritta*’ and ‘*Nritya*’ – terms taken from the *Natyashastra*, as discussed above. Kothari’s chapter on *hastas*, the hand positions used by *sattriya* performers begins:

One of the striking features of classical Indian dances is the use of hand gestures. Strictly speaking they form part of *angikabhinaya*, using the body to convey

meaning and expressions [...]. In Sattriya dances, the hastas or “hat” follow Bharata’s *Natyashastra* (NS), Nandikeshvara’s *Abhinaya Darpana* (AD) and other natyashastra texts, as well as Shubankar Kavi’s *Sri Hastamuktavali* (HM) that lists asamyuta [single hand] and samyuta [using both hands] gestures, giving their viniyogas, usages. (Kothari 2013a: 70)

Kothari goes on to discuss sattriya hand positions in relation to these texts and a table presents ‘some examples of hastas which are found in natyashastra texts and also seen in Sattriya dances.’ (71). These do not include any of the hand positions most frequently used by bhakat dancers, such as *alapadma*, *sasaka* and *hordenko*. This use of *shastric* terms and categories as a starting point, rather than any emic logic, reveals a revivalist tendency to value ancient texts over living practices; positioning nationally agreed canons as central and localised forms as derivative and peripheral. Ghanakanta Bora’s argument in ‘Chapter 7.1 *Abhinaya*’ is even more emphatic:

In the course of his pilgrimages, Sankaradeva is believed to have mastered treatises like the *Natyashastra* and *Sangita Ratnakara*, and integrated elements of these into the whole range of his dramatic and dance compositions. Even if not specifically mentioned in the traditional sattria training (the vernacular vocabulary in respect of them being in vogue) many of the hand gestures and much of the footwork are found in practical application as prescribed by these texts. (G Bora 2013: 78)

Such arguments bear immediate comparison with the revivalist representations of modern Kathak and Bharatnatyam, whose revivalists looked to the *Natyashastra* and other ancient texts for frameworks around which to construct ‘national’ dance forms which, though thriving in certain communities, they presented as ‘dead’ or ‘declining’, in order to justify their own interventions.

iv. Effacement of change between *sattriya* arts and ‘Sattriya Dance’

As with other Indian Classical Dance forms, a ‘core narrative’ (Chakravorty 2008; Walker 2014a; Walker 2014b) has formed in relation to Sattriya dance, one which is repeated by dance scholars, dancers, in publications and across countless websites. This dominant narrative continues the rhetoric of continuity, described above, by obscuring the exact nature of the relationship between the modern form of ‘Sattriya’ and the practices of the monasteries of Assam, said to have been invented in the fifteenth

century by the founder saints of the Vaishnava faith. It would seem from most descriptions that the two forms are one and the same thing.⁴⁹

The Indian government website for the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT) presents a typical description, variations on which appear across countless publications, websites and programme notes:

The Sattriya dance form was introduced in the 15th century A.D by the great Vaishnava saint and reformer of Assam, Mahapurusha Sankaradeva. The dance form evolved and expanded as a distinctive style of dance later on. This neo-Vaishnava treasure of Assamese dance and drama has been, for centuries, nurtured and preserved with great commitment by the Sattras i.e. Vaishnava maths or monasteries. Because of its religious character and association with the Sattras, this dance style has been aptly named Sattriya. (www.ccrt.in/sattriya).

Similarly, B Phukan states that ‘Xatriya dance has remained a living tradition since its creation by Sankaradeva in 15th century Assam.’ (2010: 104). From such descriptions, the reader would assume that Sankaradeva introduced ‘Sattriya dance’ in the fifteenth century. They do not take into account the significant re-shaping and recontextualisation which has gone into the creation of the new nationally recognised (though as yet still little-known) form and the significant formal changes which have been involved. Very little scholarly research has explored these processes; the recent history of India’s eighth (or ninth, or tenth, depending on which account you read) national classical dance form is leapfrogged in most writing in favour of discussions of the fifteenth-century roots and monastic context. In such descriptions, the term ‘Sattriya’ is extended to include historic performance practices of the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam and no distinction is drawn between the two.

In this section I have presented four significant tropes discernable in the representation of Sattriya dance: that *bhakats* are esoteric traditionalists; that Sattriya has a pure and uninterrupted history; that its origins are in the ritual tradition of *bhaona* and that the dance form is ‘*shastric*’. Each of these four tropes can be seen as a way in which to argue for the suitability of Sattriya dance to be considered a ‘Classical’ dance form. It meets all the criteria that, in the analysis of the two different forms of *chali nach* I conducted above, I identified as being founded in early Indian nationalism: the

⁴⁹ Anderson remarks on a similar anachronism in constructions of the Indonesian nation: ‘The late President Sukarno always spoke with complete sincerity of the 350 years of colonialism that his ‘Indonesia’ had endured, although the very concept ‘Indonesia’ is a twentieth-century invention, and most of today’s Indonesia was only conquered by the Dutch between 1850 and 1910.’ (Anderson 1983: 11 fn. 4)

desire to root expressions of Indian national culture in a Hindu “golden age” symbolised by the *Natyashastra*; the ‘democratising’ urge to wrest ownership of art forms from the grasp of traditionalists and move it into the public arena. Considering this perspective in relation to Graeber’s theory of value and exchange it becomes evident that the values being prioritised here are not so much those of the giver (the *bhakat* himself) but those of the receiver of the ‘gift’ in this case the nationalist institutions which appropriate the performance practices of the *sattras* and the concert audiences that, as Govinda imagines ‘would not like temple dance’. What would happen, in our approach to the study of this ‘exchange’ of a dance, across space, class, gender and body, if we were to focus instead on the actions of the givers? What part have the *sattras* played in the mobilisation of their dance form from *namghar* to proscenium stage, and what value has this mobilisation had for them?

Beyond nationalist narratives

In the following section, I re-visit the history of *sattr* arts and the emergence of ‘Sattriya’ in a way that seeks to look beyond a narrative of the ancient, pure, devotional and *shastric*, and understand the performance practices of the *sattras* anew. What emerges is a narrative in which the *bhakats* are active agents of change who have produced a dynamic performance practice from diverse sources.

i. A recent development

Despite arguments quoted above which impose a narrative of continuity between ‘Sattriya Dance’ and 15th-century practices, the word ‘Sattriya’ has only been used in relation to the performance practices of Assam’s *sattras* since Maheswar Neog popularised the term in academic circles in the 1950s (S Goswami 2015: 157).⁵⁰ Jibeshwar Goswami, a forerunner of the revival movement in the 1930s (Kothari 2013b: 12), is referred to in the 1987 book *Folktales of India* as ‘a specialist in a tradition of medieval Vaishnavite music and dance’ (Brice et al. 1987: 307), but the word ‘Sattriya’ is not used. The Prachin Kamarupi Nritya Sangh (Ancient Kamrupi Dance Association) grouped the various dances they promoted—including arts cultivated within and beyond the *sattr*, now categorised as folk, devotional and classical—as ‘Kamrupi’, in reference

⁵⁰ Neog, like Barua and D Nath also uses the term ‘sattriya’ to describe *sattr* administrators (see ‘Note on terms’ on p. vii of this thesis and Neog 1965: 147 and 335).

to the historical region known as Ancient Kamrup or Kamrupa which covers a large section of the modern state of Assam.⁵¹ Arshiya Sethi describes the debates around the nomenclature for the dance form prior to its 2000 classicisation and thereby historicises the term.

It could have been called Sankari, or ‘created by Sankara’, (and a rather forceful request to this effect was made by a section of the people in recent times as referred to in several newspaper articles),⁵² but the Regional Arts’ Authority, the Assam Academy for the Arts, (Assam Sangeet Natak Akademi) described it as Sattriya, or belonging to the *sattras*. This is a more dynamic and organic term that takes cognizance of the contributions of later devotees, making spaces for the evolution of the form. (Sethi 2007).

To this, I would add that the name ‘Sattriya’ also takes cognisance of the fact that the form might also be claimed by *sattras* who do not trace their origins to Sankaradeva, as discussed in Chapter Two. Sethi elaborates on this process in her doctoral thesis:

Prof. Maheswar Neog, who was entrusted with the task of preparing the case for Sattriya at the National Seminar for Dance, enlisted the help of Maniram Dutta Mukhtiyar *Barbayan*, for a suitable name for the dance tradition coming from the *sattras*. [...] However, there is controversy and debate over the nomenclature of Sattriya as the Sankaradev Sangha wants the dance form to be named as “*Sankari Nritya*” after Sankaradeva. It has taken the issue to court. The *Sangha*, established in the 1940s, is engaged in practicing “*Sankari Nritya*” and “*Sankari Sangeet*” as part of its efforts to propagate the religion and tradition of Sankaradeva. (Sethi 2013: no page number).

Though presented as natural and timeless in most accounts, ‘Sattriya’ is in fact a recent and contested term, which designates a form based on, and separate from, a still living practice.

ii. A deep involvement by *bhakats* in the classicisation process

An important piece of research into the creation of Sattriya is an unpublished thesis by Shilpi Goswami (2015) which performs two important functions as a corrective to the narratives evident in *SCNA* and similar scholarship. The first is that her account reflexively addresses the processes involved in producing a dance form which can be

⁵¹ A region which included the whole Brahmaputra valley, including parts of Assam, North Bengal, North Bangladesh, Bhutan and Purnea from about 350 to the mid-12th century CE (Barua 1933)

⁵² Arshiya Sethi sent me the references for these articles in a personal communication on 6th Oct 2018 (Staff Reporter 2000a; Staff Reporter 2000b).

recognised as ‘classical’ out of the *sattrā* performance repertoire: i.e. she openly admits that a process of change and re-organisation of the dance repertoire has been undertaken. The second is that her account foregrounds the active involvement of *bhakats* in this process. It draws from interviews with Sattriya practitioners, all contributors to *SCDA*, who are deeply acquainted with both ‘classical’ and ‘traditional’ contexts and actively involved with producing and performing both, but the emphasis is very different. The first interview is with Bayanacharya Ghanakanta Bora Muktiyar, ‘Sangeet Natak Akademi and Padmashri awardee’ (ibid.: 249) who lived in Kamalabari Sattrā from the time of his adoption there at the age of four until a flood of 1975 forced Kamalabari Sattrā to relocate to Titabor, on the main land south of the Brahmaputra river. Instead of moving to Titabor with the majority of the *bhakats*, Muktiyar left the order and moved to Guwahati where he currently teaches and performs. (S Goswami 2015: Appendix II, 249-256).

The second interview is with Anwesa Mahanta, a highly-regarded danseuse and director of an annual dance festival in Guwahati who has been involved with projects and performances across India, New Zealand, the UK and the USA and was brought up in a householder monastery (ibid.) She and her father Pradip Jyoti Mahanta were instrumental in the process of preparing *sattriya* arts for classical recognition and Anwesa Mahanta considers herself a ‘participant observer’ in the process. (ibid. 260). Based on nuanced interviews with these two informants and also a short online essay by an Assamese journalist (Thakur 2015), S Goswami has produced the most detailed written account I have found on this era of modern Assamese dance history. I supplement these accounts with detail from the broader literature on *sattriya* culture, Indian nationalism and revival projects, but this era is still ripe for further research.

Both S Goswami and Thakur start their histories of Sattriya with reference to the maverick *sattradhikar* (*sattrā* head) of Garamur Sattrā: Pitambordeva Goswami, who commissioned the building of the first proscenium-style stage inside his *sattrā* in 1922. (S Goswami 2015: 155; Thakur 2015) Garamur Sattrā, also on Majuli Island, was one of four powerful monasteries financially supported by the Ahom monarchy. Originally, Garamur was a celibate monastery like UKS but Pitambordeva Goswami introduced a number of radical reforms, including the abolition of celibacy in the monastery. (D Nath

2012)⁵³ In his history of Garamur Sattra, D Nath details the processes leading to the construction of the first proscenium-style stage in a *sattra*:

The performance of the drama [written by the *satradhikar* Pitambardeva Goswami] attracted the people so much that immediately after its performance, a stage was built in the Satra beside the *namghar* with the help of a few of his supporting [monastery] inmates (...) Subsequently, all paraphernalia associated with staging and performance were arranged to make it complete in all respects, and in the month of *kati* in the year 1922, on the day of the death anniversary of the late *satradhikar* Yogachandradeva, two dramas called *Lava-Kusha* and *Bhagya Pariksha* composed by Pitambardeva himself were performed. It is recorded that on that particular occasion, about two thousand audience from all over the state witnessed and enjoyed the performance. This stage was named after Tarunram Phukan and was called *Tarun Ranga Mancha*. According to Gangadhar Kazarika [the autobiographer of Garamur Sattra's *sattradikhar*], it was since 1922 that stage-theatre replaced *bhaona* in Garamur Satra; and this culture soon became popular among the elite section of the society in Majuli. Stage theatre in vernacular became so popular at one time that the small *Tarun Ranga Manch* could no longer accommodate large numbers of audience that gathered on such occasions. As a result, he built what is now known as the *Vamsigopal Natya Mandir* in the year 1947. (D Nath 2012: 202).

Pitambardeva Goswami's work might be considered as atypical of, indeed resistant to prevailing attitudes of the monasteries—he was critical of conservative elements within the *sattra* institution and many of his reforms were publicly denounced by other *sattradhikars* (D Nath 2012: 14, 36 and 354-370). However, it is worth noting that the movement towards proscenium theatre performances began *within* the *sattra* institution. In 1938 Kamalabari Sattra also built its first modern stage. S Goswami writes that 'at Kamalabari, the 'Majuli Milan Sangha'- a modern stage came into existence where Raslila was enacted for the first time' (S Goswami 2015: 156). She quotes a *burabhakat* (a senior monk) from UKS, who refers to collaboration between different *sattras*: “‘Late Dhaniram Lekharu Borbayan of the Bengenati Sattra,⁵⁴ Majuli, trained all dance performances, braving the opposition from various quarters.’” (ibid.).

S Goswami's account drawing from interviews with P J Mahanta, also locates the germination of these activities within the *sattra* institution; for example, referring to

⁵³ P Goswami's social reforms, his support for Mahatma Gandhi and his role in the *swadeshi* movement were portrayed in the film *Yugadrashta: The Visionary*, directed by Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta (2013) and described in detail in D Nath 2012.

⁵⁴ Another *sattra* from the *nika samhati* —the same sect of Assamese Vaishnavism as UKS (see Chapter Two, p. 43).

instances of inter-*sattrra* collaboration: ‘Late Jibeswar Goswami of Bholaguri Sattrra, Kaliabor, Nagaon took the cause that Pitambar Deva Goswami has started’” (2015: 156). Similarly, Thakur mentions that in 1960, Pitambardeva Goswami invited Bapuram Bayan Atoi, an ‘exponent, teacher and performer’ from Natun Kamalabari Sattrra to train *bhakats* from Garamur *sattrra* in ‘Sattriya dance of Kamalabari style’, in order to ‘make the dance performances more attractive’ (2015).

Kothari’s account in *SCDA*, on the other hand, does not mention the innovations in Garamur Sattrra, nor the stage built in Kamalabari Sattrra in 1938. Instead, his account of the Sattriya revival starts in 1930s Shillong, with the activities of the Prachin Kamarupi Nritya Sangh:

During the 1930s a few pioneering artists got together in an attempt to present Sattriya dances in non-sattrra locations, in order to preserve and propagate the dance form in Assam. At the time Shillong (now the capital of Meghalaya state) was the main centre for various cultural activities, and Jibeshwar Goswami along with other artists established the Prachin Kamarupi Nritya Sangh here in 1936. With his contemporaries Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Pradip Chaliha, Suresh Goswami and a few others, he toured various parts of India presenting the performing arts of Assam. Pradip Chaliha, who had academic interests and had studied natyashastra texts like *Abhinaya Darpana*, also performed what was then known as “Oriental Dances”. Jibeshwar sang devotional songs and mesmerized people by his deep resounding voice. He attempted to bring Sattriya dances out of the confines of the sattras to the stages of towns and cities. [...] These were the 1930s, when Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and his dance-dramas with dancers like Uday Shankar had brought fame to Indian dance [...] those Assamese artists who went to study at Gurudev’s Santiniketan or at Banaras Hindu University [e.g. Bishnu Prasad], presented their arts outside Assam. (Kothari 2013b: 12-13)

Kothari thus situates the momentum for the revival outside the *sattrra*, in a larger national context, referring to Benaras, Shantiniketan and the *natyasastra*, the symbol of a pan-Indian classical tradition.

Pitambardeva Goswami was a modernist and a nationalist (D Nath 2012) and the impulses to attract a broader middle-class audience and engage in mainstream Indian culture spring from the same historical moment as the urban elites who formulated ‘Sattriya’ as a classical dance genre. However, being neither part of that elite nor confirming the stereotype of devotional traditionalist, his contributions do not support and are therefore left out of Kothari’s revivalist narrative of the development of Sattriya.

Kothari mentions Shillong-based revivalist activities continuing well into the 1960s (2013b: 15-16) but in the 1950s, post-independence, a movement which sought more explicitly to nationalise and classicise the *sattr* arts started to build momentum in Guwahati, then an important city in the Brahmaputra valley and now Assam's state capital.⁵⁵ In 1953, a 'Constituent Unit' of the SNA was established in Guwahati, funded by and modelled along the lines of the central institution, but tasked specifically with supporting and propagating the arts of Assam's *sattras* (S Goswami 2015: 157). It was this institution, known today as the Sattriya Kendra, which supported the prolific scholar Maheswar Neog to spearhead a new era of research into *sattriya* arts. At this point, S Goswami and Kothari's accounts dovetail.

The most remarkable work that the Academy had undertaken was that of initiating a plan of documentation and research through instituting a cell called Bargit Research Committee (Bargit Gaveshana Samiti) with Maheswar Neog (later Dr. and Professor), then a young scholar working in Gauhati University, as its member-convener. In spite of not being either an artist or a monk from one of the Sattras, his systematic endeavours brought the 'Sattriya Nritya' [...] into the knowledge and understanding to the rest of the nation and the world. (S Goswami 2015: 158).

In 1955, Neog attended the SNA National Dance Festival, in Delhi, accompanied by a group of performers from Kamalabari Sattr, led by Maniram Dutta Muktiyar who was to become the first recipient of SNA award for Sattriya Dance in 1963 (Kothari 2013b: 8, 14). In 1958, Neog presented a paper on Sattriya at the first All-India Dance Seminar and Muktiyar and his group performed again (S Goswami 2015:157; Kothari 2013b: 14).

The foreword to *Aesthetic Continuum*, the collection of essays by Neog published in 2008 refers to this era of Neog's work as a 'crusade' for recognition:

The major assault launched by Dr. Neog as a crusader for the establishment of Assam's traditional music, dance and drama in their rightful place in the hall of glory of India's art and culture was probably in 1957 [sic] when he presented a paper Traditions of Classical Music in Assam which was skilful and exacting in the National Music Seminar, Sangeet Natak Akademi. As far [as] his work on the Vaisnava Music of Assam, its very valuable introduction in his paper has surveyed the whole field of Indian music, and he has drawn the convincing conclusion that the Bargit of two great saint-poets of Assam are composed and sung within the meaning of classical music. Of course, their styles differ from the mainstream of the

⁵⁵ The district of Dispur, Guwahati, became the capital of a truncated Assam in 1972, when the former colonial area known as Assam was divided into seven smaller states.

North Indian Classical music. But, that is no reason to nail on the counter the attainments of an independent style. And he steadily carried on his crusade presenting research papers in various National and International Conferences with the result that Assam's traditional dance, drama and music are no longer unknown art forms languishing in a far corner of the country but they are today art forms meriting National recognition. (P Neog 2008: xi-xii).

The engagement of the SNA and academic-activists like Neog is explicitly framed as a 'crusade' to persuade India's new cultural gatekeepers that *sattr*a arts are of value. At the same time as seeking to represent Assam's arts worthy of national approval, revivalists sought to translate these art forms into a language that could be understood throughout the new Indian nation and owned, not just by a closed community of practitioners, but the whole nation. In his inaugural address at the National Dance Festival, New Delhi on 2nd November 1955, Rajendra Prasad expresses the excitement of a new democratic India whose performing arts might be enjoyed by all:

Let not the fount of these arts, conceived in an atmosphere of meditation, manifested in the traditional fervour of devotion and later patronised by kings, nobility and religious institutions, dry up in secular India, where religion is an individual's affair and the basis of society is egalitarian. I think for the growth and proper development of these arts, no times could have been more propitious than the present. Instead of having to depend on the magnanimity of the nobility, these arts rely today on the support of the Indian masses. Far from being a means of entertainment for any particular class, these are a source of recreation and healthy growth of the people of all classes. We could verily describe the present times as the golden age for the development of arts. (Choudhary 1950: 460).

In this heady atmosphere, artists and activists sought simultaneously to institutionalise (in order to disseminate) and classicise (in order to be understood and valued) the art forms of Assam.

In December 1998, the famous Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika became Chairman of the SNA. Having someone from Assam at the head of India's most powerful arts institution was to prove invaluable to the project of claiming classical status for the State's dance (Sethi 2015). By November 2000, under the new name 'Sattriya', a classicised strand of *sattr*a performance practice was awarded official recognition by the SNA as India's eighth classical dance form.

In her interviews with dancer Anwesa Mahanta (S Goswami 2015: 260-1) S Goswami highlights a significant moment in the process of turning the *sattr*a arts into an institutionalised Indian classical form. In 2001, Anwesa Mahanta was to perform in

the very first Sattriya examination, based on the *arangetram* or *rangapravesh* (literally ‘ascending the stage’) of Bharatnatyam (on *arangetram* see Gorringer 2004). It is worth reproducing this part of the interview in full here because it describes a central moment in the translation of *sattr*a practices into a national classical dance form and one which is not openly acknowledged elsewhere:

Shilpi: Is there any kind of Rang-pravesh in Sattriya? What is that called?

Anwesa: Adhyapak mentioned about *moholadiya* ceremony in the Sattri where a bhakat adept in music or dance has to prove his credential for the conferment of a higher status. Keeping that in mind, my parents in consultation with my Adhyapak organised the *ashirwada* ceremony which was done in 2001 immediately after my School Certificate examination. His holiness the Sattradhikar of Natun Kamalabari Sattri came and blessed me with Bakul Phulor Mala. The entire ceremony was all public done on stage which was followed by a three hours performance.

Shilpi: That varied from disciple to disciple or was it a standard thing?

Anwesa: It was a new idea. The entire repertoire got decided earlier. My dad had a major role to play in the exercise of formulating a repertoire for Sattriya on stage. The idea behind holding such a ceremony, which is not out of place in the traditions, was to set some kind of a standard for a student to perform on stage. In the presence of the Sattri exponents, it should be accepted that they get trained by some standards and see if a performer is actually eligible to perform. So keeping that in mind it was done like offering prasadam etc on the stage in which Adhyapak take the lead. Even in the Sattri, the Adhyapak takes the lead because it is his disciple who is to perform. Honours in the programme were done to the Sattradhikar followed by a purva-ranga done by Natun Kamalabari and the second one was done by Uttar Kamalabari. So it happened in that way. The Sattradhikar gave me the *nirmali*. The first presentation was done with the purusha dress, doing some male numbers followed by a female number in the prakriti dress.

One more important thing was that in a way I was the first one- but it was a new introduction of a new set up of complete solo recital in Sattriya Dance and a formal way how a disciple could present in an *ashirwad* ceremony. There was a very large gathering. Some of them were wondering what she was going to dance? In Sattri, do we have that kind of a repertoire? Earlier whatever people had seen, it wasn't a concert kind of a thing. It was a half an hour presentation or a fifteen minute presentation in which a dancer would have just shown a Cali. The feminine numbers are more known like the Cali. But for the first time a lot of work on the male presentation was done. So in a way it was a very new introduction even to the public. (S Goswami 2015: 260-1)

Here, Anwesa Mahanta emphasises that an examination of this sort had precedence in the *moholadiya* or *mohola* of the *sattras*.⁵⁶ This, coupled with the presence of monastic teachers—the *adhiyapaks*—legitimise the process. Carving a ‘solo recital’ from the *sattra* arts similarly involved the active participation of *bhakats* and the use of frameworks and original material from the *sattra*.

iii. An outward-reaching spectacle

Arguments that root Sattriya in *bhaona* and simultaneously present the monks as devotional traditionalists ignore the fact that *bhaona* was a theatrical artform which attracted enormous audiences to non-*sattra* locations using aesthetic techniques. As I spent more time working with the *bhakats* of UKS, studying dance with them and reading more obscure scholarship on their practices, I discovered just how inappropriate these dichotomies were. *Sattriya* arts were developed as a method of proselytisation: Assamese Vaishnavism sought large audiences and they attracted them through beautiful, audience-focused performances, designed to appeal to a range of values. According to Neog:

The audience [of *bhaona*] is composed of all classes of people. There is a verse current in religious circles, which purports to show how spectators with different tastes could be interested in the representation of a play. “A drama is composed of several elements, an analysis of which please hear. The *gayanas* and *vayana* add to the glamour of the assembly. The connoisseur appreciates the words of the *Sutradhara* (*sutra*) and the dances. The Sanskrit verses are composed as there will be scholars to grasp their meaning. The brahmans in the assembly will comprehend the meaning of the songs. The village folks will understand the Brajabuli words. The ignorant people will witness the masks and effigies... These are the seven peerless elements of a drama.” A play is essentially a spectacle, and it could appeal to the highest and the lowest in society, to the learned connoisseur and the ignorant rustic alike. (Neog 1983: 173).

The performance practice he describes here clearly sought a broad audience and used a variety of aesthetic and linguistic techniques to appeal to a wide range of sensibilities. In his biography of Sankaradeva, Neog referred to the literary works of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva as ‘the chief machinery of propaganda of the faith, (which) afforded both enlightenment and pleasure to the people.’ (Neog 2005: 47-48). The success of using *bhaona* in order to attract a large public is demonstrated in Neog’s description of

⁵⁶ For a description of a *mohola* ceremony, see Chapter Eight.

provisions made to accommodate larger audiences than could fit in a *namghar*, which can already seat in excess of 800 people:

Where there are moveable walls of a prayer-hall made of bamboo or reed, such walls are removed and the roof on the sides is widened with temporarily fixed posts and cover *in order to provide space for a larger audience* in addition to the aisles.

(P Neog 2008: 122)

If such expansion of the *namghar* was not possible, the passage continues, then temporary *pandals* would be erected in an open field in adjacent villages.

Another context for *bhaona* dramas—attracting yet larger crowds—are collective performances known as *sarubhaona* (‘all’ *bhaona*), *hejari bhaona* (a thousand *bhaona*) or *barechariya bhaona*, described by Neog as ‘a peculiar practice of having more than one *bhaona* going on simultaneously at the same venue.’ (123) In their article ‘*Baresahariya Bhaona: Community Drama Festival of Assam: A Living Tradition*’ M M Sarma and Dutta describe an event in which a vast pavilion is constructed to host thousands of audience members witnessing some twenty simultaneous *bhaona* performances in the midst of an impressive cacophony. (M M Sarma and Dutta 2009).

In order to attract devotees and keep the performance practices of the *sattras* alive, the monks were required to be creative and to compose original work. In an interview conducted by doctoral researcher S Goswami, senior Sattriya dancer and teacher Ghanakanta Bora explains how creativity is an integral part of the *mohola*, the monastic examination process which decides who can have the title of *borbayan*:

Additional to knowing all the dances [...] one needs to compose his own original composition, bind it in a *tal*. There are 35 *tals* in totality. So one needs to create a *bol* in any of *tals* which is an original piece of work and perform in presence of that congregation. (S Goswami 2015: Appendix 251)

Similarly, according to Arshiya Sethi:

[I]n many *Sattras*, the *Sattradhikari* has to pen new lyrics as part of his duties. This spawned, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, a strong literary movement and created a special signature to religious creative writing, be it from the Vaishnav or Sakta fold (Sethi 2007: para 9).

If *sattriya* arts were cultivated in such populist settings, and *bhakats* and *sattradhikari* were encouraged to make original work, it becomes harder to support a history of quiet, exclusive, conservative devotion only brought ‘out of the monasteries’ in the 1930s, or by non-monks. It seems that by its very nature, *bhaona* was an important vehicle for

Neo-Vaishnavite proselytisers to promote their faith beyond the *sattrā* gates. If *bhaona* is to be understood as a principal ‘root’ of Sattriya dances, it is impossible to claim that these dance styles did not find large audiences until they were brought to the proscenium stage.

The performance practices of the monasteries of Assam are, furthermore, part of the legacy of a complex and multivalent performance landscape of which *bhaona* is but an element. A closer look at histories of performance in Assam’s monasteries reveals hints and explicit references to music and dance influences which come from beyond the context of Neo-Vaishnava worship and, while some may have been incorporated into *bhaona* at its moment of creation or subsequently, they emerged elsewhere. In this next section I will examine the representation of three such influences: the first being dances evolved in Shaivite and Vaishnavite temple settings, commonly referred to as *devadasi* or *nati* dance (a), the second being Buddhist practices (b) and the third, a choral song and dance style known as *oja pāli* (c).

iv. Multiple origins

Devadasi echoes

Whilst I was learning the *cali nach* at UKS, I noticed that *sattrā* dance vocabulary contains echoes of the female hereditary dance usually referred to under the catch-all term *devadasi* (for a discussion of this generic use of the term, see Soneji 2012). For example the word *ramdani*, referring to the first section of a *cali nach* evokes ‘*Ramjani*’, the performing community referred to in Morcom 2014:⁵⁷

Ramjana/ Ramjani [...] are listed [by Sherring, 1874] as a group whose women are involved in prostitution. Risley also states [in 1891] that Ramjana/ Ramjani men are performers who instruct singing and dancing girls as well as undertaking other occupations. [...] In Chapter IV of ‘The Castes of Bombay and its Neighbourhood’ Enthoven lists Kalawant as consisting of five branches – Patra, Ramjani, Ghikarri, Ranganli and Kanchan... and says ‘these subcastes intermarry, and follow the same profession of singing, dancing, and prostitution. (Morcom 2014: 71).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ On the relationship between *j*, *z* and *d* in Urdu/Hindi and related languages, see Beg 1988: xi.

⁵⁸ Morcom, cites Risley 1891: 130 on Bengal; Sherring 1874: 338 writing on Benares; and Enthoven 1920 on Bombay.

Whenever I asked *bhakats* at UKS where dances came from, they would tell me they were from *bhaona* and they were invented by Sankaradeva. I therefore felt it would be inappropriate to put this into question by asking directly about these *devadasi* references, and turned to secondary scholarship for clues. In his paper, ‘The Dancing Maids of Pariharesvara Siva’ (originally written in 1959; reprinted in P Neog 2008 and Puranam 2013), Neog suggested a formal connection between *sattriya* dance and the performance practices of *natis* or dancers connected to Pariharesvara Shiva temple in Dubi, Assam.⁵⁹

The different basic patterns of the dance seem to be common with the *sattr* school; *ora*, *chata*, *phul ora* (starting positions) and the foot-work. The instruments, *khol* and *bar-tal*, are the ones used in the *sattr* dances. The term, *ramjani-bajana* reminds one of the *sattr* *ramdani* meaning instrumental music without songs forming the first part of the background of *cali* and *jhumura* dances of the *sattras*. The *bols* have the same language as those in a *sattr* in the eastern part of the state (P Neog 2008: 345).

According to Neog, amongst the ‘most prominent’ of the movements made by the *nati*, was ‘the *khat* (somersault)’ (ibid: 344). ‘*Khat*’ also refers to the most acrobatic set of ‘*mati akhara*’ movements practices in *sattras*.⁶⁰ This comparison with the *sattras* is then followed by a description of the structure of the *nati* dance, but there is no comment on the reason for these similarities, or any suggestion of direction or process of transmission between the female temple dancers and the *sattr* dances; in this article, Neog simply noted a similarity. J Mahanta makes a more direct statement that the *cali nach* is ‘based on’ *devadasi* dance:

Feminine in character, *Chali-nach* is an amazing number of Sattriya dance. It is a soft and graceful dance based on purely *lasya* style of dancing. The concept of this dance item is based on the *devadasi* style of dancing that prevailed in the Hayagriva Madhava Vaishnava shrine during the medieval period (J Mahanta 2013: 76).

There are thus hints of a connection with female practitioners, and with *shaivism* in the vocabulary and scholarship of *sattriya* arts, but they are not picked up on in *SCDA* or in dominant narratives of Sattriya dance, which efface all but Vaishnavite lineage.

Buddhist influences

⁵⁹ Neog refers to temples in present day Sanitpur, Golaghat, Sribisagar and Kamrup (districts of Assam) where ‘Under the patronage which different temples enjoyed during the role of different Hindu dynasties, the institution of religious dancing flourished in its normal way.’ (2008: 341).

⁶⁰ For a discussion of *mati akhara*, see Chapter Six, p. 205.

Neog mentioned two influences on Assamese musical practices which are associated with Buddhism. Firstly, he claimed that the *bhortal*, large cymbals which are ubiquitous in Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism, are ‘believed to have been introduced by Sankara from Bhutan, which land still possesses the instrument.’ (Neog 1965 : 291)⁶¹ In his survey of instruments from North East India, D R Barthakur suggests a consensus on this point:

In many treatises of Assam it is found that *Bhortāl* is brought from Bhotdeśh... It may be assumed that *Bhortāl* comes from Tibet, Bhutan to Assam, and later on, Śankaradeva included it in the list of his musical instruments (Barthakur 2003:106)⁶²

Secondly, Neog also mentions ‘mystic songs known as Caryas or Caryagiti’ (1965 : 230 and 2008 : 17 and 453) which are thought to have been ‘composed by Buddhist siddhas’ which mention *raga* names reminiscent of those still used today in discussions of *borgeet*, the devotional songs composed by Assam’s fifteenth-century poet saints (2018: 17). Despite these hints at Buddhist connections, Neog was keen to dismiss anything other than Vaishnavite origins and influences connections and here, Buddhism is only invoked in order to be dismissed:

It is sometimes sought to be deduced that *sarana* in *nama*, *deva*, and *bhakat* had something to do with tri-sarana (that is *sarana* in the Buddha, *dhamma* and *samgha*) in Buddhism; but this supposition does not seem to have any firm ground (Neog 1965: 215).

Neog does not make it clear who he is arguing against, nor does he explain away the similarities he has just pointed out. What is clear—and this resonates throughout Neog’s writings—is a desire to articulate difference between Buddhism and Assamese Vaishnavism. In the following passage, the articulation of difference with Buddhism is emphasised by stressing conformity with mainstream Hinduism.

The arrangement of *sattras* [...] often evoke comparison with the Buddhist monasteries or *viharas* with the provision of monks’ dwellings. But the influence of two other types of religious institutions, more than Buddhist *viharas*, seem to have gone deep into the origin of Assam *sattras*. These are the great Vaisnava shrines, the Jagannatha temple at Puri being the chief amongst them, and, secondly, the residential institutions of various monastic communities of India, chiefly those of the schools of Sankaracarya and Ramananda (ibid.: 309-310).

⁶¹ D Nath makes the same claim (2012: 62), but his only source is Neog 1965.

⁶² Barthakur cites Barua 1967 and H Pathak 1991.

Through such statements, Neog sought to disassociate Assamese Vaishnavism from local Buddhist history, locating it instead on a map of India populated with Vaishnava saints and temples. Neog represents Sankaradeva as eager to disassociate Assamese Vaishnavism from Buddhism, by citing the fact that Sankaradeva's partial translation of book eleven of the *Bhagavat Purana* diverges from the original most markedly in the part which mentions that Vishnu's incarnation as Buddha (ibid: 194). Similarly, in a chapter on 'Bhortal Nritya,' a *sattriya* dance form which uses these large cymbals, there is no mention of a possible Buddhist connection. Instead, the origins are located within the *sattria*: 'Bhortal Nritya is popularly believed to have been evolved by the Vaishnavite monk, scholar and musician Sri Narahari Burha Bhakat in the Barpeta Sattria sometime in the early 20th century' (K Bora 2013: 108).

Indrani Chatterjee offers an insight into why India's Buddhist connections have been downplayed in colonial and post-colonial historiography in her ground-breaking historical survey of the once tightly interconnected region which today encompasses northeast India, the Himalayas, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, *Forgotten Friends* (2013a):

[T]he Sufi, Vaisnava, and Saiva lineages of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries have received serious historical attention. Such attention has been withheld, however, from the Bon Tantric and Mahayana Buddhist lineages that occupied the same terrain. Moreover, the particular relationships that existed between Buddhists and non-Buddhist others—such as the Sufi or Vaisnava lineages around them—have also been ignored. This deficit is only partly due to post-nationalist distance from the material archaeological and numismatic remains, records, and lived practices in large swaths of the area. The oversight of collocated Buddhist and Bon figures is more likely based on a linear and largely Christian logic of time and history. In its Protestant and post-Reformation aspects, such logic implied the absolute uniformity of the faith of subjects and their sovereigns. Moreover, British colonial scholars in the early nineteenth century constructed a chronology in which a 'Hindu epoch' was followed by a 'Muslim one' and so on. When some texts in the same century were found to describe Buddhist thought and practice, colonial scholars retrofitted Buddhist into this chronology. Accordingly, Buddhism was believed to have 'died' in India and lived outside it after the thirteenth century. This view has been spectacularly influential in shaping postcolonial Indian historical scholarship, especially of eastern India. (I Chatterjee 2013a 1-2)

Indrani Chatterjee's book describes a deeply interconnected 'monastic geography' in which patronage, trade and cultural exchange flowed across terrain now criss-crossed with international borders. Her work explains both for the cultural exchanges between

Vaishnavite and Buddhist monasteries suggested or refuted by Neog, Barthakur and others, as well as why these connections have been overlooked by historians.

Given the continued preoccupation of Assamese scholarship to assert a place for Assam in the larger national imaginary, it is clear why representations of *sattriya* emphasise connections with the majority Hindu culture of the Indian nation, rather than trying to understand ‘foreign’ influences.

Oja pāli origins

Notwithstanding the general claim that Sattriya dance originated in the *sattras* of Assam in the form of *bhaona* dance-dramas, various accounts agree that *oja pāli*—the storytelling form which furnishes Sattriya dance the majority of the mimetic hand gestures—predates the advent of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.

Oja pāli describes a number of different musical storytelling forms practised in Assam and its neighbouring states in which a solo singer-storyteller (the *oja*) sings, recites and in many cases dances and makes mimetic gestures. He is accompanied by a chorus of *pāli*, who play the *khuti tāl* (small cymbals made of bell metal), echo lines after the *oja* and, if he is dancing, sometimes mirror his footwork. Scholars tend to divide the different forms of *oja pāli* into two broad categories: ‘Epic’ (based on the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) and ‘Non-Epic’ (based on the stories of Manasa/ Padma, the snake goddess) (B Goswami 1985: 76 and K Bora 2013: 47). Under the category ‘Epic’, B Goswami lists six styles, of which he says the first, Vyāsa-sangita is ‘the most important’ and ‘goes back to the remotest past’. He argues that this is the form from which ‘the other forms of *ojāpāli* evolved’, including the form practiced in the *sattras* (B Goswami 76-82). J Mahanta confirms that *oja pāli* was an adopted dance form: ‘Though *Oja-Pali* was of non-Vaishnava origin, the sattrā picked it up, set it in the format of their own and established it as a distinct form.’ (J Mahanta 2013: 76).

Generally, Neog agreed with this formulation. In 1965, he stated in that *oja pāli* predated Vaishnavite-drama and aspects of the art for were ‘later on brought to the Sattrā system of dances, and... reorientated’ (1965: 293).⁶³ Curiously, in a 1962 article, Neog contradicts both earlier and later statements on *oja pāli*, by saying:

⁶³ For other accounts that argue *oja pāli* was adopted into *sattras*, see; P Neog 2008 (1954): 110-112 and (1955) 227-8; K Medhi 1950 and Kothari 2013: 19-20.

[W]e do not get any historical evidence of *oja-pali* before Sankaradeva and it is mainly the supposedly tempting analogy of the Greek chorus of Dionysus developing into the plays of Sophocles, Euripides as Aeschylus that has inspired scholars like Medhi to float the theory of the emergence of the Sankaradeva drama from the *oja-pali*. This theory does not hold much water if we think of the genesis of other medieval dramatic forms like Kathakali, Yakshagana and Bhagavata-melanataka in other parts of India (2008 (first published 1962); 120).⁶⁴

Neog argues that Medhi's emphasis on *oja pāli* as an influence on *bhaona*, is because of the latter's disinclination 'to admit North or South Indian influences' (ibid.: 118). I would suggest that it is Neog's *overemphasis* of such influences that leads him to consider the genesis of Kathakali, Yakshagana and Bhagavata-melanataka as a more useful area of enquiry than local art forms.

As well as these influences, it is also important to note that much of what Sankaradeva was doing with *bhaona* was in fact innovative. As well as blending a variety of elements with different origins, his works demonstrate creativity which refuses to fit revivalist attempts to argue for a *shastric* basis for *sattriya* arts. According to William Smith:

The Sanskrit term *anka* denotes a one-act play, and though efforts have been made to establish the origins of *ankiya nat* in Sanskrit models, this has proven difficult, since Assamese dramas violate many of the rules of Sanskrit dramaturgy and differ in structure, subject, treatment, and language. Shankaradeva must have been influenced by Maithili drama, which was flourishing at the time *ankiya nat* first appeared, but his plays do not follow Maithili models either. *Shankaradeva was an innovator rather than an imitator*. (Smith 2007: 166. My emphasis.)

Given the emphasis that scholars have put on a pan-Indian, *sanskritic* and Vaishnava narrative, it may be impossible to recover the influences and innovations of *sattriya* arts, in their earliest stages and subsequently. However, the hints of influence from beyond the *sattr* and beyond the *shastric* are enough to problematise dominant notions of the *sattras* as closed and monocultural.

Conclusion

In an interview in January 2018, Bhabananda Barbayan told me about a big project he had undertaken in 2012 to stage the '*Cinha Yatra*', a play which, according to the

⁶⁴ Neog himself uses the 'Greek chorus' analogy to substantiate his own claim that *bhaona* emerged from *oja pāli* in a 1955 article which does not cite K Medhi (P Neog 2008 (1955)).

caritas—the oral hagiographies of the Vaishnavite saints—was the first *bhaona* play that had been written and directed by the poet-saint Sankaradeva. Though the play is well-known by its title alone, its script has been lost to history, so Bhabananda wrote a script himself and directed a production which adhered closely to the descriptions in the *caritas*. According to Bhabananda, the production starred ‘local villagers’ and took place on a large ‘secular stage’ on Majuli Island. When I asked him why he did not hold the play inside the *sattrra*, Bhabananda answered that it was because he wanted to include everyone: ‘If I do in the *sattrra* I cannot involve women.’ (Guwahati interview, 2018). Though he was re-creating a ‘traditional’ piece of work, dating back to the time of Sankaradeva, it did not occur to him that this should be done within the precincts of the *sattrra*, or should exclude anyone.

In popular representations of Sattriya dance and the *sattras* of Assam, it is implied that *bhakats* do not value mobility. They are represented as traditionalists, who perform dance as ritual and who wish to keep this dance within the confines of the monastery. The motive behind such representations lies in the desire for a traditional and ancient ‘other’ to Indian modernity, which functions as an un-broken link between the Indian nation and an ancient past, as I discussed in the Introduction. What this does, however, is ignores the fact that the *bhakats* of Assam, and the *sattrra* institution more broadly, have cultivated performance as a way of reaching out to ever larger audiences. To reach these audiences, performing artists continue a tradition of presenting material of different kinds and making production choices in order to reach a variety of people. Thus, *Cinha Yatra* takes place outside the *sattrra* in order to be inclusive, by permitting the involvement of female actors. Similarly, the mobilisation of the *cali nach* to the auditorium and the proscenium stage, and via engagement with nationally-approved performance norms are of value to the *bhakats* because they lead to the spreading of their message, and the validation of their actions, throughout the imagined nation.

Chapter Four: Mobilising *sattriya* arts internationally

Part I - Contexts

Beyond nationalist paradigms, what are the pathways available to Assamese Vaishnavite performers? Marginalised by dominant narratives which seek to define monastic practice as something introverted and ancient, are there ways in which Assamese Vaishnavites are able to reach out to audiences beyond the *sattria* without having to ‘become classical’, or to buy into the revivalist narratives which have claimed them? In the next three chapters, I describe projects in which *bhakat* performers have worked to create alternative methods to reach Indian and international audiences which have allowed, to a certain extent, for the performers to circumvent and resist nationalist-revivalist interventions. They have done so by strategically mobilising dance overseas and onto the bodies of foreign dancers, in ways which take back some degree of control over their own representation. According to David Graeber, gift exchange does not demand immediate reciprocity, but builds networks of influence, allowing the giver to strengthen connections, or even create social ties where none existed before (Graeber 2001: 45). The demand for Assamese dance does not exist in the UK, so it needs to be built. Thus it is possible to envisage the work that the *bhakats* do to create dances for ‘export’ not as a process of commoditisation (and nor is it profitable) but as part of a process of strategic gift giving. Seeing it in this way, it becomes possible to understand why teaching foreigners to dance, and taking dance on tour outside India might be of value to the performers themselves. If the *bhakats* ‘give away’ their dance strategically, they create direct social relationships with people who they would otherwise only encounter through national mediation. They make international contacts, have their work spoken about in foreign countries, and, in a number of cases (as I will discuss in Chapter Six), make friends with foreigners who organise tours and provide access to foreign funding.

Looking at this work from the perspective of a community of artists hailing from a marginalised state on India, who lie outside both the national mainstream culture and the global economy, can highlight the power structures and countours of the performance landscape they traverse. Because *bhakats* of Assam cannot simply purchase a flight ticket to travel, they need to rely on the connections they make through deploying dance as their principal resource. These connections and pathways to

mobility thus become visible in this case study, in a way that studies of affluent or mobile artists would miss, simply because of ease of access.⁶⁵ Homi Bhabha argues that to understand the modern nation state, it is crucial to focus on lives at the margins. The exclusions enacted at borders and the migrant experience shows us the limits of the national imaginary (Bhabha 1994). Similarly, I feel that a study of artists who are outside, but breaking into global networks, can both show us the shape of those networks, and also how new networks are created. In Graeber's exploration of theories of value, he argues that a principle problem with Appadurai's notion of 'regimes of value' is that it seems to pre-supposes existing 'regimes' in which commodities circulate (Graeber: 30). He offers Strathern's observations of Melanesian gift exchange as a way of showing that these value systems are not simply 'entered into' but are actively created:

Note that all this is not a matter of "entering into" higher spheres or even levels of exchange that already exist. It is these actions—of hospitality, travel, and ex- change—that create the levels in the first place. And at their most basic this is all "levels"—indeed, all such abstract "structures"—are. They consist of human actions. (Graeber 2001: 45)

When considering the ways in which the *bhakats* of UKS gain access to international performance opportunities, I was continually frustrated in my attempts to compare them to other artists who are part of, or even gaining access to 'global networks', by which I imagined the pre-existing networks of venues, promoters, festivals and 'scenes' available to globalised' dance forms, such as salsa and ballet. These networks are, no doubt, the result of human actions, but the *bhakats* of my study are currently excluded from them. Thus it was important to come back to the actions of the artists of my study and closely examine how they themselves create pathways to mobility.

In the previous chapter, I looked at how *bhakat* choreographers made 'textual' and 'contextual' changes to the *cali nach* which reflect values which have been institutionalised by the Indian nation state. Preparing their dance in this way, as a 'gift' to the urban middle classes and to the Indian nation, allowed them to gain recognition at a national level, and thus gain much wider circles of influence. By 'textual' changes I referred to the introduction of *abhinaya*, danced-drama and elements from different *sattriya* performance practices and the removal of some sections to shorten the dance. By 'contextual' changes, I referred to the difference of setting and artist implicit in the two forms: the *namghar* version being seen as suitable for the *namghar*, and the

⁶⁵ See Bhaba (1994) for a discussion of the importance of the migrants and margins in the creation of a notion of the modern nation state.

‘classicised’ version being taught outside the monastery in a modern auditorium. Through analysis of these translations of text and context it was possible to read how the *bhakat* choreographers made their dances ‘visible’ on a national level, by staging the values of democratisation and sanskritisation through the production itself. Here, and in the following chapter (Chapter Five), I undertake a similar analysis of a much longer ‘translated’ dance: the *Vrindavani Paal*, a one-hour production choreographed by Bhabananda Barbayan especially for a UK tour that I organised in July 2016. This dance, like the ‘auditorium’ *cali nach* combines *namghar* dance practices, re-organised and shaped in order to gain mobility, but of a different sort. Whilst the *cali nach* represents a movement from *namghar* to concert stage; from local devotional practice to national icon, the *Vrindavani Paal* demonstrates a journey across international borders; from India to the UK and within that, to a number of new contexts: schools, dance workshops and museums. Just as the *bhakats* re-shaped and re-contextualised *cali nach* in a way that would be valued by national cultural gatekeepers, Bhabananda’s choreographic choices, and my own choices of performance spaces, were designed to create value for the gatekeepers of international cultural mobility. I include myself in this section alongside Bhabananda as a ‘producer’ of the dance production, because I was responsible for booking and liaising with venues and overseeing the food, travel and staying arrangements. In order to mobilise *sattriya* dance in the UK, Bhabananda and I collaborated, so my actions and choices need to be examined along with his. This chapter and the next are two parts of one larger analysis of the internationalisation of *sattriya*. In this—envisaged as ‘Part I’ of the analysis—I consider the ‘contexts’ of the encounter; the cultural gatekeepers whose value systems were addressed by Bhabananda in order to mobilise a production of *sattriya* dance overseas. In Chapter Five – ‘Part II’—I focus in on the ‘text’, discussing choices of dance moves, artists, instrumentation, props and stage positioning and reflecting on how these creative choices create value for a dance on tour.

‘Giving away’ dance over seas costs money. Who funded the flights, fees, visas and stay for the artists which enabled the dance to be performed in the UK? What value systems are enshrined in these institutions and how are they anticipated by the way Bhabananda and I designed the tour and the dance? Just as it is important to ask why an Assamese devotional dance ends up on a concert stage in processes of national revival, here I ask why *sattriya* arts make their way to a school in Newcastle, the British Museum and a festival of Utopia at Somerset House. As we saw the national values of democratisation and sanskritisation interpolated by Govinda’s *cali nach*, this chapter

explores the value systems which Bhabananda anticipates in his choices of movement, staging, artists and instrumentation and that I consider as I organise the tour itinerary.

Three institutions were crucial to the mobilisation of *sattriya* dance on a UK tour. The first was the ICCR—the Indian Council for Cultural Relations—the Indian government agency that supports Indian artists to travel abroad. Because Bhabananda was an ‘empanelled’ member of the ICCR (a position that I will discuss below), he had access to ICCR support for artists’ fees and visas for the 2016 UK tour. We saw in Chapter Three how the institutionalisation of certain values in the Sangeet Natak Academy affects the way that *bhakats* arrange material intended for mobilisation in academies and on metropolitan stages across India. By looking at some of the selection procedures of the ICCR, and their outcomes, it is possible to see evidence of unconscious institutional bias⁶⁶ through application procedures which lead to the domination of only certain types of artists, and of *sattria* material on overseas tours. It is also possible to see why much of the content of *Vrindavani Paal* was constructed along classical lines, even though this is not necessarily of more ‘value’ to the international audiences we encountered.

The second institution I will consider is ACE, the organisation responsible for investing public money in the arts in the UK, and who funded the production costs of the 2016 tour with a £15,000 ‘Project Grant’. ACE has a large number of procedures in place to safeguard against institutional discrimination,⁶⁷ however, there are clear indications, in the questions asked, in the guideline, and in the advice of ‘relationship managers’ of particular priorities held by the organisation, which will improve applicants’ chances of success. I consciously designed the tour in ways which would satisfy these requirements, and therefore the context of the performance of *Vrindavani Paal*—the venues it was performed in, and the workshops we organised—can be seen as directly related to the values of this funding institution. Just as creating a dance for a proscenium arch stage can be seen as responding to the Sangeet Natak Academy’s values of democratisation (as we saw in the case of the *cali nach*) so interactive

⁶⁶ ‘A tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued [...] Institutional racism and institutional sexism are the most common examples’ (Chandler and Munday 2011:82).

⁶⁷ For example, applications for funding, and guidelines are available in braille, in large font, in simplified language, in video format, and there is a large amount of support available from ‘relationship managers’ to guide artists through the application, to avoid the exclusion of those who struggle with the application process.

workshops in schools and with adult learners in Newcastle can be seen as ways to make *sattriya* arts valuable to ACE.

The third institution that had a significant impact on the way that Bhabananda choreographed the *Vrindavani Paal*, and on the way that I produced the tour, was the British Museum: the first venue of the UK tour and host to the exhibition of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’, the textile which inspired the dance. In this section, I consider two important aspects of the role of the British Museum in influencing the way that *sattriya* arts were mobilised on this tour. Firstly, the fact that the British Museum owns Assamese objects which legitimised a performance of Assamese dance, as part of their remit to ‘animate’ exhibitions, was a key factor in starting the UK tour there and indeed, the tour taking place at all. Secondly, the whole of Part 3 of Bhabananda’s *Vrindavani Paal* employed material, stories and songs from *sattria* performance traditions to build a creative response to the British Museum’s ‘Vrindavani Vastra’. The images and stories depicted in the textile were brought to life in ‘sattriya’ style and thus, the textile itself is addressed choreographically as part of Bhabananda’s project to give the dance value abroad. At first glance, it would seem that this means Assamese Vaishnavite values are being anticipated in the dance rather, than the UK institution. Though ‘the museum setting, almost by definition, displays ritual objects out of context, thereby strapping them of circumstance and purging them of original function and significance’ (Branham 1994), as Alan Bennett argues, museum objects are afforded with a ‘further order of significance’ (2009:171) by the narratives into which they are embedded. In the curatorial narrative of ‘Krishna in the Garden of Assam’ (the temporary exhibition of which it was the focus point), the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ is presented as an object which is of sacred importance to Assamese Vaishnavites. However, a closer investigation of the history and the provenance of the textile shows that claiming the object as a ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ sits uncomfortably with Assamese Vaishnavite definitions of the term. In the *caritas*—the ancient hagiographies of the founder saints of the religion, the term ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ seems to refer to something rather different. Through a detailed examination of the textiles historiography it is possible to see that Western art history has over-written indigenous knowledge. Therefore mobilising *sattria* dance in line with the iconography of the textile can be seen as aligning with the values of British Museum as cultural gatekeepers. At the same time, however, the textile (and textiles of this type) take on a new value, as a ‘gateway’ object which provides access to mobility, and spreading the word of Krishna. As we saw in Chapter Two, Assamese Vaishnavism as practiced by the *bhakats* of UKS eschews idol worship: sacred objects and associated

rituals are simply not a part of their practice. On the other hand, bringing people together to share songs and dances about Krishna is crucial: part of the textile's value, for the *bhakat*-choreographers of this study, therefore lies in its usefulness in gaining access to performance platforms in Europe and America.

The ICCR and institutional discrimination

In this section, I discuss the ways in which the selection processes of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations allow certain types of art to travel and exclude others. I argue that whilst choreographing a dance performance intended to travel abroad with ICCR support, Bhabananda consciously adapts *sattriya* performance practices to suit these institutionalised values.

Founded in 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the ICCR was originally envisioned as a way of building and reviving connections with India's neighbours – in particular Iran, Afghanistan and other Muslim countries, but with a vision to create ever broader connections with artists, academics and cultural bodies across the entire globe. An arm of the state for 'soft diplomacy', the ICCR, like the British Council, works by exporting Indian culture. Today the organisation sends artists all over the world. In order to understand the constraints and processes which characterise the mobilisation of Indian performing arts overseas, it is important to consider the ICCR—which provides opportunities for foreign exposure, and controls the movement of hundreds of thousands of Indian artists. Through its modes of selection, it decides what sort of arts and artists travel abroad as representatives of 'Indian culture'.

The ICCR maintains a list of practitioners who have been deemed eligible by panels of government-appointed experts to represent India abroad and therefore have access to funds to support foreign tours (ICCR 2018). Those on the list are known as 'empanelled' artists, categorised as first tier (outstanding), second tier (established) or third tier (proficient), depending on their skill level as ascertained by the panel. When *Sattriya* was recognised amongst India's 'Major Indian Classical Dance Forms' by the SNA in the year 2000 (see Chapter Three), it became possible to be 'empanelled' as a 'Sattriya' artist. The ICCR 'Sattriya' list currently reflects the demographic of those who practise *Sattriya* generally: it consists almost exclusively of female, urban middle-class practitioners or male practitioners who are no longer, or never were identified as *bhakats*. The only exception is Bhabananda: the first and only individual identifying as a *bhakat* on the list. Bhabananda joined the list in 2011 as one of two 'established'

artists, the other being Ramkrishna Talukdar, SNA Award winner for Sattriya in 2017 who was schooled in Kathak before Sattriya and who, though closely affiliated to Bamakhata *sattrā* in Barpeta district, was not a *bhakat*.⁶⁸ There are two eminent female dancers listed under ‘outstanding’: Indira P P Bora and Sharodi Saikia and the twenty names on the ‘proficient’ list are all female, middle-class practitioners. Though, as is evident from Chapter Three, *bhakats* have received government support and recognition in other contexts and were part of creating ‘Sattriya’ as a new category in India, it is clear from the ICCR list that the genre of ‘Sattriya’ in its exportable form is overwhelmingly represented by non-monks. Why is this the case, and what does this mean for the representation of Sattriya abroad?

In order to be empanelled by the ICCR, artists need to complete and submit an application form which is downloadable from the ICCR website and available only in English, along with a ‘professional quality’ VCD/ DVD containing at least 30 minutes of content.⁶⁹ Such an application process immediately favours literate English-speaking applicants who have access to film equipment and DVD writers. The ICCR empanelment list for Sattriya reflects this institutional bias: for the most part, the listed proponents are highly educated, fluent English-speakers, with a strong social-media and online presence. A Google Image search for ‘Sattriya’ draws up page upon page of professional photographs of this urban, educated category of mainly female dancers. YouTube searches for ‘Sattriya’ tell a similar story. A few of the *bhakats* in UKS now have laptops, and connect to the internet via mobile phones and ‘data sticks’, but most use local computer and internet shops to download and print forms and to move photographs and short video clips from their cameras to CD’s. The computer-literate

⁶⁸ In an interview published in an online blog, Talukdar describes his relationship with the *sattrā*, his education and his relationship with Maheswar Neog:

Eminent scholar late Dr. Maheswar Neog was instrumental in setting up the [State Music] college. He was of the opinion that Sattriya dance needed to be taken out from the Sattras and brought in the ambit of formal education so that this glorious tradition could be passed amongst the new generations. I passed out in first class as the first graduate in Sattriya dance.

The Directorate of Cultural Affairs then sent me outside to study classical dance so that I could find out why Sattriya was not being accorded Classical dance. I learnt Kathak in Luknow under my guru Sri Surendranath Saikia. After coming back, I was offered a job at the State Music College in 1992. (Dutta 2018).

⁶⁹ Accessible here: www.iccr.gov.in/content/empanelment-artists. The guidelines mention the following ‘mandatory items’: ‘Chali, Nadubhangi, Jhumura, Bahar Naach, Gosai Prabes, Gopi Prabes, Krishna Naach, Gopi Naach, Sutradhari, Ojapali, Abhinaya Excerpts and Dances from Ankiya Naat Bhaona.’

amongst the *bhakats* are also those who speak the best English and are likely to be amongst the small minority that have been educated to degree level, or higher. As a rule, therefore, it is ‘Sattriya’ rather than *sattriya* which is most likely to find its way out of India, performed by non-monks, rather than monks. Bhabananda’s dual position as both empanelled ICCR artist and practising *bhakat* in an Assamese *sattr* is exceptional.

The troupe from UKS, led by Bhabananda Barbayan in 2008, were the first ever *bhakats* to tour in Europe, whilst the new female practitioners had been touring Sattriya dance abroad since the 1960s.⁷⁰ Here I consider what it is about Bhabananda’s background, qualifications and specific position in the monastery that has allowed him to spearhead performances of *sattriya* by Assamese *bhakats* overseas. His story—the ‘exception that proves the rule’—reveals the sort of artist that is valued by the ICCR’s selection systems.

Like all the *bhakats* who live in Assamese *sattr*, Bhabananda Barbayan (né Bhabananda Hazarika) was schooled in devotional dance and dramatic forms from an early age. He was taught by his *sattr* ‘father’ (in fact his biological uncle) who had adopted him at the age of three and who happened to be one of the *sattr*’s most important *adhyapaks* (teachers). Bhabananda inherited a vast repertoire early on, and when his father-teacher was paralysed in 1991, he was required to take on a high level of responsibility. In 1992, at the unusually young age of 17, he was given the title ‘Barbayan’ – awarded to monks who have gained a high level of proficiency in a large repertoire of dance, percussion and singing, and have passed examinations in front of monastery elders (Paris interview 2017). Whilst many of the monks I interviewed at UKS were the first in their families to become *bhakats*, Bhabananda represents the seventh generation of *bhakats* in his family. In each generation of his family, a *bhakat* brought a nephew into the monastery.⁷¹ Bhabananda is therefore part of an ‘old’ monastic family, so he has built connections and influence both within and beyond the monastery over many years.

Bhabananda explained that officially he held an inherited position of responsibility amongst the *bhakats* in UKS, related to the particular house he inhabits in the monastery (Majuli Interview 2016). Living quarters in the monastery are arranged in

⁷⁰ Indira PP Bora and her daughter Menaka Bora toured Australia and New Zealand accompanied by *bhakat* performers from Barpeta Sattr in 2014.

⁷¹ Bhabananda is unable to do this, as his brother only has one son who he is unwilling to send there, so he represents the end of the familial line of *bhakats*.

four rows (*'hati'*) which make up a long rectangle surrounding the *namghar* (monastery temple). Each *hati* contains a 'head house', whose older members (the *barabhakats*) decide religious issues. Bhabananda lives in the 'head house' of the South *hati*, and when his uncle passed away in the early 2000s he took over both as head of his household, and as the youngest member of this committee. Bhabananda is the first *bhakat* of UKS to have gained a doctorate. His thesis, in English, is a vast comparative study of the rhythmic patterns used in different Vaishnavite monasteries, completed at the Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata. His seniority in the monastery—both virtuosic and inherited—may have given him a greater confidence to embark on some ambitious and somewhat controversial ventures. Since the 1950s, the performance practices of Assam's monasteries had started to be taught in academies outside the *sattras*, but only within Assam. In 2006, Bhabananda decided that he would start the very first Sattriya academy outside the state of Assam. When I asked him why he wanted to do that, he said 'I thought that sooner or later someone was going to do it, and I thought it should be me' (Guwahati Interview 2018). In other conversations, he intimated that it was a duty he had to fulfil – that he would prefer to remain in the monastery, and that it was hard for him to live in Delhi for so much of the year, but he believed deeply that it was crucial for a monk to teach Sattriya in the capital city, and no one else had stepped forward except him. By the time Bhabananda had set up his academy in Delhi, hundreds of small Sattriya schools had sprung up all over Assam, but all were run by the new middle class practitioners who could not provide the spiritual context for the dance in the same way as someone raised in the monastery. Bhabananda's specific characteristics and secure position in the *sattri* allowed him to access channels of mobility unavailable to other monastic performers with his training, and to become the first monastic proponent to perform in Europe.

The ICCR plays a significant part in the mobilisation of *sattriya* dance overseas. Because its application process favours literature, English-speaking, middle-class dancers, for the most part only the parts of *sattriya* repertoire that have been re-codified as 'classical' gain mobility. Because of certain skills and qualifications Bhabananda has been able to surmount the unconscious bias of the ICCR's selection system and therefore take material that is not part of the Sattriya canon—such as *oja pali*, *gayan bayan* and the more strenuous *mati akhara* positions—across borders. He has, however, also introduced and re-organised dance elements in a way that makes the perform as a whole adhere to notions of 'classicality' as discussed in Chapter Three. As I explain in Chapter Five, the performance contains a dance item known as a *Vandana* which,

although a crucial component of a Bharatanatyam recital, does not find an equivalent in *namghar* performance culture. What is more, the entire choreography was created for a proscenium arch stage, implying that Bhabananda anticipated an audience which would value a ‘stage-ready’ performance (something which I, as tour producer, had not anticipated myself, and therefore had mostly organised performance spaces ‘in the round’). Travelling as a ‘classical’ artist, as the ICCR support predicates, Bhabananda introduced many ‘classical’ traits, despite the fact that these would not necessarily make the dance more palatable or enjoyable to a UK audience unschooled in the protocols of Indian classical dance. Here, therefore, it is possible to see how Bhabananda’s choices of staging and dance content are predicated on his understanding of the values of the ICCR—a gatekeeper of cultural mobility.

ACE and ‘widening participation’

Another institution whose values were taken into consideration as we produced the UK tour in 2016 was the ACE. The route of the UK tour, the venues we visited and the inclusion of workshops were all in direct response to ACE funding requirements. ‘Grants for the Arts’ are competitive, and in London are awarded to roughly 30% of artists who apply (personal communication with ACE ‘Relationship Advisor’ 2014).⁷² Applicants must work through a detailed 24-part on-line application, attempting to explain their project in terms which align as closely as possible to the ACE’s requirements. My only objective was to facilitate Bhabananda’s passage to the UK, so I was prepared to shape the project in whichever way would achieve this. The tour can therefore be read as a very close fit to the ACE’s values. To understand the mobilisation of *Vrindavani Paal*—the way that it physically moved across the UK, it is therefore important to understand these values.

ACE has a mandate to engage with British audiences who lack access to UK arts due to economic and social exclusion or physical restrictions. ‘Diversity’—understood in relation to age, nationality, religion, race and geography—is a crucial concept in ACE strategy: if a project will reach ‘diverse’ audiences, it is more likely to attract funding. The Kala Chethena Kathakali Company, frequently supported by ACE funding, reflects this requirement exactly, using terms such as ‘maximum participation in the arts,’ ‘Kathakali and the culture of South India accessible and enjoyable to all,’ in

⁷² The Strategic Touring Fund and Grants for the Arts have now been discontinued and absorbed into the new Arts Council National Lottery Project Grants.

its online marketing. (Kathakali website 2019). My project was designed to meet this requirement in various ways. It is ACE's remit to reach 'geographically diverse' audiences that led to my decision to take the production on tour beyond London. Various ACE strategies have been aimed at promoting art outside London and in 'areas where people have low engagement with the arts and those that rely on touring for much of their arts provision' (ACE website 2018).⁷³ I felt that restricting our performance activities to London would limit our chances of funding, so phoned venues around the UK and set up a five-venue UK tour.

As well as geographically marginalised communities, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) British communities are considered by the ACE to have restricted access to state-sponsored cultural activity in the UK.⁷⁴ Another formulation of the application which impacted the route of the tour was the question of whether my project was 'specifically aimed at any identified ethnic groups' (Grants for the Arts: 2016). Here, the applicant is invited to tick mark any 'ethnic groups' they feel might be encouraged to participate in the project. I had not, until that point, thought that the tour would or should appeal to a particular group of people, but it struck me that the ACE might look at my application more favourably if I made it clear that a minority group would be engaged. I ticked: Asian/Asian British – Indian; Asian/Asian British – Pakistani; Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi. Now I needed to prove that I knew how to reach this audience. I contacted the Sage at Gateshead and asked the team there to help: what were their outreach strategies to reach British Asian audiences? I was in luck: the Sage hosts a regular 'Riverside Ragas' event: evenings dedicated to South Asian performing arts, which attracted large South Asian audiences. The *bhakats*' performance could be included in that series. What was more, my proposed performance date in Gateshead, 16th July 2016, coincided with GemArts' Masala Festival—a celebration of Indian arts. Masala Festival director Vikas Kumar enthusiastically agreed to include the 'Monks of Majuli' performance in their programme. I also had to prove that the performers I would bring from India would not just perform to audiences, but that their art form would be interpreted through explanations and workshops which would give the UK audiences meaningful and interesting experiences. The ACE application form emphasises 'interaction' as well as 'performance' by requiring applicants to provide a prediction of

⁷³ In this vein, on 27th June 2017 ACE announced a pledge to spend £170m outside London, in its latest effort to address 'repeated criticism that not enough money was being spent in the regions' (Brown 2017).

⁷⁴ According to the 2016 summary of the 'Taking Part' survey (a UK-wide annual survey which assesses participation in the arts): 'Arts engagement is significantly lower for the Asian ethnic group than for the White and Black ethnic groups' (Taking Part 2016:1).

the number of ‘participants’ that will ‘benefit from this activity’. ‘Participants’ requires a separate figure from ‘audience’. Only including performances on the tour would have forced me to write a zero in the ‘Participants’ box, which I was concerned might jeopardise our chances of success. I therefore wrote to each venue where I had proposed performances and suggested holding workshops as spin-off events. All the venues responded positively and also, Vikas Kumar arranged for workshops and performances at three secondary schools and the Newcastle Hindu Temple as part of the Masala Arts Festival. I was able to write ‘120’ in the ‘participants’ box.

Just as Indian national values of democratisation and sanskritisation, enshrined in the Sangeet Natak Akademi, motivate a movement of the *cali nach* from *namghar* to a modern auditorium, and the ICCR’s unconscious bias towards ‘classical’ practitioners of Sattriya dance, ACE values of ‘diversity’ and ‘widening participation’ encourage a movement of *sattriya* dance from stage to workshop and from London to Newcastle. As producer of the tour, and in collaboration with the *bhakat* performers, I designed an itinerary that answered these values.

The British Museum and the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’

I have shown that the ICCR’s support encouraged Bhabananda to include ‘classical’ material into the *Vrindavani Paal* and to prepare a stage-ready performance, rather than ‘directly’ import *sattriya* performance practices to the UK. ACE’s support also led me to produce a tour which moved around the country and included workshops and interactive aspects. As choreographer and producer of the tour, Bhabanda and I took action to make *sattriya* dance valuable to cultural gatekeepers in order to gain mobility. Similarly, Bhabananda made choreographic decisions which were specifically aimed to give *sattriya* dance value to the programme bookers of the British Museum. As I describe in Chapter Five, Bhabananda selected poetry, mimed actions and short danced-dramas which animated particular iconography on the Vrindavani Vastra—the textile centre-piece at the heart of the British Museum exhibition.

In what follows, I explain the ongoing significance of this textile type in affording Bhabananda mobility to Europe and America. In doing so, I show how aligning his artistic production with objects that have been venerated within institutions raises the value of that art to the gatekeepers of cultural mobility. Given the centrality of this type of textile to the enabling of the UK tour, and the dance produced for it, it is important to

spend some time understanding what the object is, how it came to be in London, and the processes of power and knowledge production which it embodies.

i. Incongruent narratives

The name ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ translates as ‘Cloth of Vrindavan’. Vrindavan—a town in Uttar Pradesh, northern India—is believed to be where Krishna spent his childhood; the name immediately evokes the stories and exploits of the young Krishna, and implies significance to followers of Hinduism who are devotees of Krishna. Maheswar Neog, the prolific Assamese scholar discussed in Chapter Three, locates various references to a ‘*vṛndāvēni vastra*’—a 180-foot cloth which ‘depicted Kṛṣṇa’s life in Vṛndāvaṇa’—in the *caritas*, the traditional biographies of Neo-Vaishnavite founder Sankaradeva and his early apostles (Neog 1965: 120, fn 120). In Neog’s influential English-language work *The Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam* (1965) he mentions the cloth six times, citing various sources. I will quote Neog’s references in full, because they have paved the way for ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ scholarship ever since. I have included references to Neog’s sources in brackets.

It was at the request of Cilārāya that Śaṅkara had a forty-yard-long piece of cloth woven by the weavers of Tātīkuci (Barpeṭā), depicting the early activities of Kṛṣṇa up to the killing of Kāṁsa. (120)

[Gopāla Budhā Ātā] took to the profession of weaving; and when Śaṅkara was having his *vṛndāvēni vastra* woven at this village, Gopāla was one of the twelve Marals or chiefs of weavers placed under the saint’s command (136. Neog cites Daityāri, 744-f.; *KGC.*, 208).

...for the sake of this monarch [Naranarayana], had scenes of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood woven into a sheet of cloth 180 feet long. This was known as *vṛndāvēni vastra* (304. Neog cites Rāmānanda, 1122-ff.; *KGC.*, 210).

It is commonly believed at Barpeṭā that the *raṅgiyāl ghar* was built on the spot where Śaṅkara had the big *vṛndāvēni vastra* woven by Mathurādāsa and other weavers (Neog 317).

The *vṛndāvēni vastra* was 120 cubits in length and 40 cubits in breadth, while the *kīrtana-ghar* is 130 cubits long and 44 wide. These measurements were given by Mahimchandra Ātai, Budhā-bhakat of the Barpeṭā-sattrā, an expert in the guru-lore (317. Neog cites *KGC.*, p. 208).

Śaṅkara kept his *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* in the general store (339. Neog cites Daityāri, 1084, 1381-f., 1539; Rāmānanda, 1138; *Dāmodaradevar Caritra*, 382-f.; *Vaṁśīgopāladevar Caritra*, 333, 2-3-83).

For these statements, Neog cites four different sources: (1) ‘The Life of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva’ by Daityāri Thākura, the grandson of Mādhavadeva’s sister, composed between 1619-1648 (Nātha 1999); (2) the *Vaṁśīgopāladevar Caritra*, by Rāmānanda Dvija, the son of Srī-Rāmādeva, a disciple of Madhavadeva’s disciple Gopala Ata, written 1633 – 1679 (Neog 1957); (3) *Dāmodaradevar Caritra* or *Guru-līlā* ‘by Rāmarāya and Nīlakaṇṭha Dāsa’, written in the early eighteenth century (edition not stated); and (4) the anonymous *Katha-Guru-Carit* (‘Oral History of the Guru’, referred to here as *KGC*), date unclear, but Neog places it ‘in the early decades of the eighteenth century’ (1965: 20) (Lekhara 1952). He critically analyses these four amongst all the other texts he uses for his history of the Assamese Vaishnava movement and sorts them into two groups: ‘early’ (early to mid-16th century) and ‘late’ (late 17th and early 18th century) (Neog 1965: 1-38). (1) and (2) belong to the ‘early group’ and (3) and (4) to the ‘later group’. Despite the fact that Neog trusts the former group more because of their relative ‘closeness’ to their subjects (4) and he suggests that later *caritas* were ‘probably invented *ad hoc*’ (16), he relies on the *KGC* for specifics about the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’.

Like many other works of scholarship on Assamese Vaishnavism, the beautifully produced hardback *Srimanta Sankaradeva: Vaishnava Saint of Assam* (2011) also cites the *KGC* liberally. Despite its temporal distance from the life of Sankaradeva, this account provides richer detail to the story of the saint’s great textile.

Vrindavani Vastra brings into focus the range of Sankaradeva’s creative genius. *Katha Guru Charita*, a chronicle of events during the saint’s lifetime, gives the genesis of the Vrindavani Vastra: During his visits to the Koch Behar royal court, Sankaradeva often regales Chilarai with descriptions of the fun-filled days of the young Krishna in Vrindavan. The prince was enthralled, and wished he could partake of the experience by *sniffing* Sankaradeva’s lips as he spoke. Sankaradeva replied that, for the prince’s enjoyment, he would have the narrative inscribed on cloth in graphic form.

He engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi, near Barpeta, to weave a forty-yard-long panel of tapestry depicting Krishna’s early life in Vrindavan. Sankaradeva provided the designs to be woven, chose the various colours of the threads to be used, and personally supervised the weaving. It took about a year to complete and, deriving its name from its theme, came to be known as the *Vrindavani Vastra*. When first

unveiled for viewing, people were astounded to see the true-to-life depictions of Krishna's activities in Vrindavan, the exuberant colours, inwoven captions, and exclaimed that the cloth has come from the heavens and its maker is not a human. (B Phukan 2010: 108-110).

In the early 1990s, Rosemary Crill, an Indian textiles expert from England and then head of the V&A textiles department, was investigating a group of figured silks which were located in various private and public art collections in India, Europe and North America.⁷⁵ The silk pieces bore the image of Vishnu, episodes from the life of Krishna, and Assamese text, which was later identified by Samiran Boruah as being excerpts from plays attributed to Sankaradeva himself (Boruah 2007). In 1992, Crill published a ground-breaking article entitled: 'Vrindavani Vastra: Figured Silks from Assam' (Crill 1992) in which, for the first time, the textile of the *caritas* was claimed to still exist as a tangible reality, held in Western Museums for all (who could make the journey) to see. But at the same time, Crill's article was the first to use the term 'Vrindavani Vastra' to refer to a textile *type*, as in 'examples of these *Vrindavani vastra*' (ibid.: 1) as opposed to a specific and legendary textile commissioned by King Narayana and woven under the direction of Sankaradeva. According to Crill, a 'Vrindavani Vastra' textile must be made of a certain quality of silk, use a particular weaving technique and contain Vaishnavite iconography: they do not have to be proven to be Sankaradeva's productions. She does suggest that the two extant examples believed to have been made in the 1560s (currently displayed in the V&A in London and at the Musée Guimet in Paris), due to their contemporaneity with Sankaradeva, could have been part of the very textile referred to in the *caritas* (77), but they are, in her account, but two examples of many.⁷⁶ The museums which house these cloths started to refer to them as 'Vrindavani Vastra' after her research; for example, the British Museum's online catalogue reads 'This type of textile is known in Assam as Vrindavani Vastra.' (British Museum website: 2017) This institutionalised connection between the 'figured silks' of European and American museums and the *vṛndāvēni vastra* of the Assamese legends has had

⁷⁵ These are: the V&A Museum and Museum of Mankind (part of the British Museum) in London, the AEDTA Collection in Paris, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art and Newark Museum, New Jersey in the USA and Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, Venice. The only example in a collection outside of Europe and North America that Crill discusses is held in the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, India. Crill, op cit. Blurton also refers to examples in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Musée Guimet in Paris. (Blurton 2016: 12).

⁷⁶ The Guimet 'Vrindavani Vastra' example was part of a collection amassed by Jean and Krishna Riboud (née Roy) who founded the 'Association for the Study and Documentation of Asian Textiles' (AEDTA) in Paris in 1979. The textile is one of the 148 items from the AEDTA on display in the Guimet Museum in Paris, housed in the Jean and Krishna Riboud Collection gallery (B Phukan 2010: 124)

significant impact amongst Assamese scholars and politicians, thirsty for tangible examples of Assam's illustrious past, until now ignored or refuted in South Asian histories, as discussed in Chapter Two. Delegations of politicians and representatives from Assam's cultural institutions began to visit the museums which house the 'Vrindavani Vastra' examples, and conversations about return or loan of the 'Vrindavani Vastra/ *vṛndāvēni vastra*' to Assamese museums are on-going (personal communication with Richard Blurton 2014-2016. See also Staff Reporter 2017; H K Nath 2017; Staff Reporter 2016a; Staff Reporter 2016b).

Despite the general acceptance of Crill's decision to name the textile examples she was researching as 'Vrindavani Vastra', there are a number of problems with this identification, which are suggested in in *Krishna in the Garden of Assam: The history and context of a much-travelled textile*, the book which accompanied the British Museum exhibition of their 'Vrindavani Vastra' (Blurton 2016). Blurton is careful to place the name of the textile between inverted commas or use it only adjectively (eg. 'the first use of 'Vrindavani Vastra' textiles' (6); 'It is likely that all the 'Vrindavani Vastra'-type cloths...' (9)), allowing that a 'type' exists, but problematising the relationship between these pieces and the *vṛndāvēni vastra* of the *carita*. He is clear that a separation needs to be made between the textile in the British Museum, and the historical records:

[T]here is a record of Shankaradeva arranging for the weaving of a lengthy cloth at the request of Chilarai, the brother of the Koch king, Naranarayana (c. 1540-87): it is actually referred to, in a later life of Shankaradeva, as 'Vrindavani Vastra'. This, we are told was to enable the story of Krishna's early life, up to the death of King Kamsa, to be depicted; it would be the tool for use in instructing devotees in the narrative of Krishna's life... However, the repeating nature of a small number of episodes from the life of Krishna as we see in these woven silk textiles, and the vertical and non-sequential nature of the depictions, *make the link between this story and our textile a little difficult*. (Blurton 2016: 12. Emphasis added)⁷⁷

The identification of the European cloths are based on three main observations. Firstly, the *vṛndāvēni vastra* is understood to be an aide-memoire to telling Krishna's life story and the textiles identified as 'Vrindavani Vastra' examples feature scenes from

⁷⁷ The 'Vrindavani Vastra' was displayed as part of the British Museum's 2006-7 'Myths of Bengal' exhibition in Room 91, which 'focused on 'the tradition of storytelling in Bengal, and features religious stories presented in the remarkable Bengali scrolls and artefacts from the Museum's collection.' Blurton acknowledged that this might have been a misleading way of presenting a cloth which 'certainly contains and reproduces narratives, but it is *not* a narrative textile, like that described in the *carita*.' Interview with Richard Blurton, 17th November 2017, London.

Krishna's life: Krishna vanquishing the crane demon Bakasura, dancing on the head of the serpent demon Kaliya and hiding up a tree with the clothes of the *gopis* and so on. Secondly, some of the cloths feature Assamese words woven into their surface, which Crill knew to be Assamese poetry, and have been later identified as excerpts from *Kaliya Damana*, an *ankhiya bhaona* play attributed to Sankaradeva and performed in Assam's villages and monasteries to this day (Baruah 2007). Thirdly, the textile's colours seem to resonate with the descriptions of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* in Assamese sources. Crill quotes Das Gupta to emphasise the match:

According to R Das Gupta's translation of certain Assamese texts, cloth of Brindaban was woven "in a large variety of coloured threads, like red, white, black, yellow, green etc. ... Each scene had its caption below it and these too were loom embroidered [sic]" (Crill: 77)⁷⁸

However, there are ways in which the extant textiles now known as 'Vrindavani Vastra' refuse to fit the descriptions of their namesake. Firstly, the cloth woven under Sankaradeva's direction is understood to be enormous: ten times larger than any of the examples we have today. Secondly, according to the *caritas*, the textile was intended as a narrative aide, which should contain images of Krishna from his birth to the death of Kamsa, perhaps in sequential order. The example in the British Museum does feature scenes from Krishna's youth, but they are non-sequential, and are fewer in number than the images of seven other avatars of Vishnu (Rama, Vamana, Varaha, Parashurama, Narasimha, Kurma and Matsya) and two different depictions of Garuda, the bird mount of Vishnu (Blurton 2016: 30-46). The Guimet museum Vastra, one of the two examples Crill suggests might be part of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* ('a commission from the Prince of Cooch Behar of about 1565' (77)) contains scenes from the Ramayana and images of Kurma and Matsya who are not part of the Krishna Lila narrative and are not mentioned in any of the descriptions of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* of legend.

If we look at Das Gupta's statement in full, we see that Crill has left out the parts of his description that do not match:

The tapestry was 120 cubits long and 60 cubits broad and it took about a year to finish the weaving. Since the scroll depicted Krishna Lila scenes it was known as the Vrindavani Vastra or the Vr̥ndāvali Vastra. The designs were woven with a large variety of coloured threads like red, white, black, yellow, green etc. Of the colours some were evidently of mixed colours or 'misravarna' like Kach-nila,

⁷⁸ Crill cites Das Gupta 1982: 190; Das Gupta cites Neog 1963 (Neog 1965).

Gaura-syama etc. The above colours are still popular in Assamese loom embroidery work. The scenes depicted included those from Krishna's birth in the prison of Kamsa, to the vanquishing of Kamsa by Krishna. Each scene had its caption below it and these letters too were loom embroidered. (Das Gupta 1982: 190)⁷⁹

Whilst Das Gupta states that the tapestry is '60 cubits broad' (= 30m) (citing A Das 1955), and Neog says '40 cubits in breadth' (=20m) (citing *KGC*) Crill states: 'It's breadth, not specified, was presumably a loom width' (less than two meters wide) (Crill: 78). This is certainly true of the fragments we have today, but does not correspond with the notion of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* of the *caritas*, expressed by both the authors Crill cites.

Crill notes these incongruities but she puts them down to the vagaries of oral history. Arguing that descriptions of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* do not match the examples exactly is, 'taking the references too literally, especially as they were written years after the cloth was made and the author probably never saw an example of it himself.' (personal communication 16th November 2017). Indeed, not one of the authors of the *caritas* that Neog cites claim to have seen the cloth themselves, and piety and exaggeration could easily have led to a beautiful cloth featuring Krishna's image to be represented as an enormous narrative textile depicting the Krishna Leela. The *caritas*' authors could have been influenced by their knowledge of contemporary traditions of visual narrative aides—like the *pato chitro* scrolls of neighbouring Bengal—when envisioning the tapestry of the great saint. But such an argument puts Crill's claims above those of the *caritas*, which are, to Assamese Vaishnavite devotees and scholars alike, held as authoritative.

Despite this, the British Museum exhibition, the Guimet Museum and the Philadelphia Museum have all chosen to use the name, without inverted commas, to refer to the Assamese textiles in their collection. Histories which describe the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* according to the *caritas* say it exists in fragments in the Musée Guimet, Paris and the V&A, London, without mentioning, or attempting to reconcile the differences between historical accounts and material artefacts.

The connection Crill has drawn between textile examples found in museums around the world, and Sankaradeva's Assam is undeniable, but the connection with the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* of the *caritas* requires the *caritas* to be wrong on a number of crucial

⁷⁹ Das Gupta cites A Das 1955 as his source for the dimensions of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra*, and Neog 1963 (Neog 1965) for all the other details.

details. It has not been proven that such a cloth did not exist and yet the appropriation of this term to refer to a different sort of textile requires those who have been brought up with the old stories of a vast narrative textile to reimagine their own history along terms set by Western art historians and museum curators.

ii. The value of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’

Regardless of the provenance of the textile, however, now that the textile has been drawn out of storage and publicised as an ancient Assamese object, the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ holds important value for Assamese people in general, and the *bhakats* of my study in particular. Assam’s climate is damp and unsuitable for the preservation of textiles and paper objects, therefore very little material culture remains from the time of Sankaradeva, beyond stone epigraphs and metallic objects (see Chatterjee 2013a). Moreover, as I explained above Assamese historians and politicians defensive about Assamese culture which they perceive to be denigrated or ignored in Indian scholarship are excited about the ‘discovery’ of an Assamese object from the fifteenth-century, and the interest and importance afforded to it by Western scholars museum curators. The textile ‘put Assam in the map’ of Western knowledge about South Asia. Bhabananda Barbayan slowly discovered that this validation of Assamese culture led to tangible opportunities for mobility: he was able to travel to countries which housed examples of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ in their collections. The textile therefore took on a new kind of value: it became a key factor in his project of mobilising *sattriya* arts.

Bhabananda’s first tour outside India was to France and Portugal in 2008.⁸⁰ It was produced by Nadine Delpech, a French writer who travelled to Majuli Island in the 1990s and has written and produced films about *sattri* traditions, and Mathias Coulangue, a traveller who had befriended the monks over several visits to the monastery in the early 2000s. Together, Nadine and Mathias had formed the *Association* which organised and supported the tour by UKS *bhakats*, billed as ‘Les Moines de Majuli’ [‘The Monks of Majuli’]. Shortly after Bhabananda and the rest of the troupe landed in

⁸⁰ As far as I know, no Assamese *bhakats* have travelled to Europe before 2008, or the UK before 2016. The 2008 Europe tour marked the first time monks from a Vaishnavite monastery in Assam had toured outside India as performers since the Indonesian tour of 1975 where representatives from three *sattras* performed as part of a presentation of Indian classical dances (according to Bhabananda and other monks in interview). Indira P P Bora and her daughter Menaka Bora organised a tour of New Zealand and Australia accompanied by monks from Assamese *sattri* in 2014, and have themselves performed *Sattriya* dance across the world. Menaka Bora and Shatarupa Chatterjee are both *Sattriya* dancers living in London.

Paris, their French hosts took them on a surprise visit to see the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ textile held in the Musée Guimet. Bhabananda described the moment that he and his brothers from UKS saw the textile in the Musée Guimet as follows:

When we entered the room, then we said “where you bring us?” Then they say, “you can see.” But when we see the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ we didn’t recognise it. We’ve never seen that kind of cloth. They tell us ‘That’s the “Vrindavani Vastra” we are like [gestures goose pimples and laughs]. It was very touching that time. But I didn’t think we’d do something. At that time we only saw and only salute [laughs] ... We just salute and feel that we are - that our life is complete. (Paris interview 2017).

The following year, in 2009, Bhabananda returned to France; this time he came alone to deliver dance workshops in a small town in the South. At his request, Mathias Coulangue arranged for him to visit Paris so that he could see the tapestry again. In 2010, Bhabananda travelled to Paris for a third time, for a duet performance at the Théâtre du Soleil, and then later was joined by a group of ten dancers for performances at Musée Carnavalet. On this occasion he gave dance workshops at ARTA (Association de Recherche des Traditions de L’Acteur) and met Bezabel—the Mexican dancer who later completed a master’s degree in Sattriya dance. Through her, Bhabananda got into conversation with two professors from ARTA, who asked him if he had seen anything whilst in France which connected to the *sattrā*, or to Assam. In our Paris interview, Bhabananda related what he remembers of this conversation:

“Yes, I told them, I found something very special: the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’.” That’s when immediately my ideas came. Why we don’t think about this? Because he asked me, “If you find any interesting thing in Paris from your culture?” Since then, I only thinking about this: “How I can do something about ‘Vrindavani Vastra’?” (Paris interview 2017)

The encouragement of the tour organisers and the professors from ARTA for Bhabananda to see and produce work based on an object of Indian art in a western museum has resonances with earlier male dancing pioneers who came to Europe. For example, according to Joan Erdman, the biographer of Uday Shankar:

Shankar’s search for authenticity arose from studies at the Royal College of Art under Sir William Rothenstein (who had earlier introduced Yeats to Tagore). Rothenstein noted that Shankar’s paintings on Krishna themes lacked “the soul of India” and sent him to the British Museum to study photos of Indian temples, paintings, sculptures, and crafts. [...]. Shankar later acknowledged that: “William Rothenstein had a perfect understanding of what I was doing. He was the first to

open my eyes to the greatness and beauty of India and her arts...” (quoted in Khokar 1983:25).’ (Erdman 1987: 69).

In 2011, Mathias Coulangue managed to arrange a six-week residency for Bhabananda to return to Paris to study the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’. Bhabananda spent the time working with Bezabel and her co-students to create a dance production based on the textile, which he then developed further and staged in March 2012 in two large-scale performances involving fifty monks from various Assamese monasteries: once in UKS’s auditorium and then in the Kalaksetra, an important cultural institution in Assam’s capital Guwahati. Bhabananda funded both productions with some support from elders at the monastery, to the dismay of some of his monastic brothers who resented how much of their money, conceived as the property of the nuclear family living in the same *boha* (see Chapter Two), was being spent on the project. Under severe financial pressure, but also keen to stage further productions of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ dance, Bhabananda had to look for funding from beyond the Sattrā.

Immediately I thought “why don’t I ask the ICCR? I am an artist of them⁸¹, so I can ask them”. So, I wrote a letter to the president of the association. He was a very well-known person: a litterateur - a scholar from the south of India. Immediately after, he wrote to me: “I want to meet you. Please come and meet me as soon as possible”. Then I went to the ICCR office and he was interested in me. He asked me my CV and he asked many things about my life and he was so interested. Then I told him “we want to bring these things to Europe.” He told me: “Ok, proceed then. First you have to collaborate with their museums and maybe some institute from them. First you have to come from them, otherwise we cannot send you to them.”.

Bhabananda contacted Mathias Coulangue, who set about arranging a tour which would allow Bhabananda to take a version of his ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ dance to French festivals and performance venues, with the help of the French Kathakali expert and director of Centre Mandappa, Milena Salvini. The tour, which included a performance at the Musée Guimet, took place that very summer (14th June – 16th July 2012), supported by the Indian Embassy in Paris and Kaleidans'Scop, a small arts organisation run by French Kathak dancer Isabelle Anna, who helped to direct the touring performance (Indereunion 2012). Bhabananda and his twelve-strong troupe performed a six-part show, whose middle section, based on the Assamese dramatic form *bhaona*, animated certain scenes from the Guimet Museum ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ fragment. After this tour, Bhabananda visited France annually, with all expenses covered by the host

⁸¹ Bhabananda became an ‘empanelled’ ICCR artist in 2011.

organisations. While researching in France, Bhabananda learnt that another example of the textile could be found in the British Museum in London, just a short journey away. His emails to the British Museum went unanswered and his UK visa application was rejected, and it was not until 2015, when he met me, that he found another opportunity to visit the London ‘Vrindavani Vastra’, as I detail in the next section.

In 2018, Bhabananda travelled with a troupe to Philadelphia, US to participate in a project funded by the Pew Center for Arts in partnership with dance artist Madhusmita Bora. According to the grant proposal:

Threads of History: Resurrection of a Textile will bring to life the stories embedded in the “Cloth of Vrindavan.” Madhusmita Bora will collaborate with monk, choreographer, and scholar Bhabananda Barbayan to curate a program that draws its movement material from Sattriya, a classical Indian dance form that has a shared history with the cloth, while creating new dance vocabularies and themes.’ (Pew Arts 2018).

Madhusmita used images and video footage from the French and UK iterations of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ project in her application for funding. The textile thus constituted an entry point and a linking factor between three important international tours of *sattriya* dance.

Bhabananda does not have the money or social status to travel the world easily and at the time and in the manner of his choosing. He therefore must make sure that the way that he represents *sattriya* dance is of value to those who enable travel. By identifying himself, and his art form with a cultural artefact that has already received institutional recognition and validation, Bhabananda is able to mobilise *sattriya* across international borders.

iii. The ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ and the UK tour

In the previous section, I explained that the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ became a ‘gateway object’ which enabled Bhabananda to return to France and travel to the US. In what follows, I explain the ways in which the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ was also the object that led to me calling Bhabananda Barbayan to travel to the UK, and which led to us starting our tour at the British Museum. The intention of this ‘thick description’ of the events leading up to the tour is twofold: firstly it demonstrates my own involvement in the tour, by way of autoethnography, in order to reveal how closely I was implicated in the very matter I analyse in this thesis. Secondly, through detailing the ways in which a tour comes about, this ethnographic case study shows the importance of connections and

power in gaining access to mobility. For example, I describe how my access to seeing the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’, when it was not on public display, was denied to me until my connections to King’s College London and potential access to funds became apparent. A narrative like this allows for a full understanding of the meetings and chain of events which characterise the way that creative connections and encounters come about. This ‘thick description’ reveals how the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ acted as the catalyst for a meeting between Bhabananda Barbayan and me, and thus gave him the opportunity to mobilise *sattriya* in the UK for the first time.

In December 2014, researching for this PhD, I came across a Wikipedia article about Srimanta Sankaradeva which mentioned the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’. It said that the largest example—a nine-metre tapestry—was now owned by the British Museum, less than a mile away from where I was reading about it. Online news articles showed images of Assamese dignitaries being shown the cloth, but the British Museum website showed the location of the textile as ‘Not on display’ (British Museum website 2014). I found an email address for the curator of the South Asian collection, Richard Blurton, and told him about my research, expressing my interest in seeing the piece. His reply was friendly but firm: he was delighted to hear about my interest in Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism, but I would not be able to see the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’. Fortunately, however, it would be on public display for six months at the centrepiece of an upcoming exhibition about Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism. I would be able to see it then. I immediately wrote back, in some excitement, with two suggestions. Would he like me to organise a show at the British Museum by performing *bhakats* from that region? And would he be interested in co-organising a conference of scholars and practitioners interested in India’s northeast? I told him about my connections in UKS, and my access to academic research funding. His reply was instant and positive and three days later I was in Blythe House looking at the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ rolled out along a vast table. Blurton told me early on that the Museum’s budget was very competitive and that he would have to make a case to the research department for funds for a conference. As for the dancers, he imagined that the best the Museum could offer would be a £1000 performance fee from the Friday evening concert budget. If there was to be a performance by Assamese *bhakats* in the British Museum, I realised, it would have to be part of a tour and other funding should be sought. As I gathered tour dates and funding (from AHRC, King’s College London, and ACE), Blurton re-doubled his efforts to organise a conference on Assam which would coincide with the exhibition and explore related themes.

In May 2015, I visited Mathias Coulange in Paris, both with the intention of interviewing him about his work with the *bhakats*, for this thesis, and asking for advice on how best to proceed with a UK tour. Perhaps we could collaborate and make a joint tour of France and the UK to spread out the cost of flights from India. Amongst his generous and plentiful sharing of information, Coulange advised that I should work with Bhabananda Barbayan, who had been the principal contact in all the tours he had organised, and who was responsible for the earlier ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ project. In August 2015 I travelled to Majuli Island and spent two months observing and learning performance practices from *bhakats* from UKS. During this trip that I finally met Bhabananda. While we were there, we looked at the British Museum’s online images of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’, but they were not of high enough resolution, which is why, on my return to the UK, I sent Bhabananda Richard Blurton’s book *Krishna in the Garden of Assam* (2016).

Between August and November 2015, Bhabananda and I exchanged numerous emails and worked hard to find funding for the tour. I was awarded £15,000 by ACE under their ‘Grants for the Arts’, £1500 from my doctoral training hub LAHP (a section of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, AHRC) and £1000 from KCL. Bhabananda secured flights, visas and fees from the ICCR as an ‘empanelled artist’. In April 2016, the ICCR confirmed their support, and over the next few months, I secured a tour team, camera crew, driver and van and communicated with all the venues about technical requirements and riders. In July 2017, the troupe of eleven performers arrived in London for the first time.

The ICCR, ACE and the British Museum thus became the main institutional vehicles for the UK tour. Bhabananda Barbayan and I were two principal producers of the tour, but the ways in which we shaped the tour itinerary were intended to show the value of *sattriya* arts in ways that would be appreciated by these institutions. Embodying the institutional power of the British Museum, the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ became an important lynch-pin in the tour’s creation. Whilst the original meaning of the term, taken from the *caritas*, became lost, the textile took on a new and potent value as an enabler of mobility for Assamese Vaishnavite performers.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the actions taken by Bhabananda Barbayan in order to mobilise his art form. In creating work and a touring programme which is of value to

the various funders and gatekeepers of culture, he has created new routes to global mobility. Because of his possession of certain cultural and social capital, Bhabananda was able to access ICCR support, beyond the reach of most *bhakats*, but travelling with the support of this institution as a ‘classical artist’ also comes with certain expectations which became manifest in various performance choices. Being the ‘exception which proves the rule’, Bhabananda’s particular personality and skill set demonstrates why most *bhakats* and their non-classical repertoire rarely travels outside India. However, through building networks with French, American and English performers, entrepreneurs and institutions Bhabananda also strengthened his own pathways which he can now access without the intervention of state support. Bhabananda and I shaped our project in ways that we felt would appeal to funders and gatekeepers and therefore their priorities and discourses are written into our path through the UK.

Limiting the sorts of artists who can travel affects the kind of art that travels: if the majority of artists who can travel dance the ‘post-revival’ style of Sattriya (the ‘auditorium’ style discussed in Chapter Three), then that is the form that will be seen overseas. By gaining access to channels of mobility usually closed to *bhakats* trained in *sattras*, Bhabananda and his troupe are unique in being able to present forms like *oja pāli* and *mati akhara*—repertoire that is not necessarily required for ICCR empanelled members—outside of India. However, when Bhabananda and the troupe dance a *Vrindavani Paal* that reflects the descriptions of the ‘Vrindavani Vastras’ created by western art historians and instituted in the British Museum, rather than those of the Assamese *caritas*, it becomes evident that Indian dance, travelling to the UK, represents a translation between languages that wield unequal power.

Having established the context for the performance of *Vrindavani Paal*, in the following chapter I describe how Bhabananda’s choreography, *Vrindavani Paal* weaves together traditional, ‘classicised’ and new material designed for the UK tour.

Value emerges in action; it is the process by which a person’s invisible “potency”—their capacity to act—is transformed into concrete, perceptible forms. (Graeber 45)

In the close analysis which follows, we see the creation of value as Graeber suggests, as a process, in which particular choices and actions are taken to make *sattriya* arts ‘perceptible’—recognisable—to the institutions and gatekeepers they encounter.

Chapter Five: Mobilising *sattriya* arts internationally

Part II - Texts

In this chapter, through a close reading of the *Vrindavani Paal*, I consider the choices made by choreographer *bhakat* Bhabananda Barbayan when translating *sattria* performance practices into a one-hour production designed for a UK tour. I demonstrate that certain features of staging and dance moves are chosen in dialogue with the values of the cultural gatekeepers discussed in Chapter Four, in particular the ICCR, the ACE and the British Museum's representation of the 'Vrindavani Vastra'. As in Chapter Three, when I showed how the very structure of the *cali nach* was formulated in relation to the preferences of Indian national institutions, here I show how a dance form mobilised across borders negotiates and engages a number of value systems.

In making this comparison, I contribute a close textual analysis of a dance 'on tour' to scholarship on the mobilisation of dance. Many accounts which discuss performing art in touring contexts (see for example Hutnyk 1998) hint at the inauthenticity of productions aimed at 'foreign' audiences, without giving a glimpse of the nature of that 'inauthenticity': i.e. what has changed, and *from what* has it changed? Whilst it might seem obvious what constitutes 'westernisation' and 'modernisation' of dance practices for the proscenium stage, in order to give credit to the original practitioners, it is important to look at the sources they have drawn from, the details of transformations, and the considerations which motivate these changes. In Skinner's account of the movement of 'Jive' across different bodies, regions and nations, for example, though he states that dances 'diffuse and mutate, interbreeding with each other' (2012:32), there is no physical description through which we can imagine precisely how these dances change as they move. Similarly, Hughes-Freeland makes a tantalising comment that '[Big international festivals] produce long-term impacts on costume and choreography' (2012:110) in Southeast Asia, without illustrating how the mobilisation of art forms onto festival stages actually shapes their production values. Theodossopoulos provides an interesting analysis of how an Emberá community in Panama choreograph traditional dance forms for tourist consumption, (2012), which provides inspiration for this chapter. However, I have yet to come across a close critical examination of the re-shaping of dance practices for an international tour.

After a performance at The Barn at Burycourt—a venue in Hampshire—an audience member asked me about the authenticity of the dance: was this what the *bhakats* danced ‘at home’? Before I could answer, he gave me an example:

There’s that moment when the drummer plays at the centre of the stage with all the drums. That seemed very spectacular, very showy... I mean that sort of thing seems a bit more... adapted. (interview 14.07.2016).

The gentleman’s comment referred to a display of drumming virtuosity performed by Bhabananda Barbayan during the *gayan bayan* finale described on page 184. What this analysis allows me to show, however, is that whilst the selection and arrangement of *sattriya* performance items were motivated by a desire to create value for an imagined western audience, Bhabananda had invented very little that would not be found, in some context or other, in Assamese Vaishnavite practice. A close examination of the performance in relation to the original practices thus allows us to tease out what is ‘created’ and what is considered ‘conventional’, rather than making assumptions based on appearance.

The method I use for this comparison is by comparing the structure, staging and content of *Vrindavani Paal* as performed in the British Museum Great Hall in July 2016 with practices I have observed in UKS over six years and read about in ethnographic work on Assamese Vaishnavite performance practice (notably P Neog 2008; Neog 1984, 1965; M M Sarma and Dutta 2009; Richmond 1974 and Kothari 2013e). This account draws from a number of different methods of dance analysis. Firstly, I employ ethnography: I was involved in five different iterations of *Vrindavani Paal* as it toured the UK, and was engaged in sound checks and assisted with wardrobe and staging, thus gaining a close inside perspective on the production of the dance. I also used various types of observation: I watched the performances live and I also scrutinised video footage of the British Museum performance, documented in high resolution on a Canon C300 and a Canon 5D and a zoom sound recorder by filmmakers Kashfi Halford and Aixa Figini, who filmed the entire UK tour. I used iMovie and Wondershare to edit the raw footage of the performance into one continuous file, accessible here: https://youtu.be/htPTxVHf_5Q. I also made a detailed description of this dance performance, formulated with extensive discussion with Bhabananda in person and over WhatsApp and email which is included at the end of this thesis as Appendix I. Interviews were therefore also an important part of the way I ‘saw’ this performance,

thus gaining an insight into artistic intention, and perhaps even eliciting more reflection on meaning than Bhabananda had made while putting the performance together. He and I spent two days together in Paris in April 2017, discussing the video footage of the British Museum performance and demonstrating hand gestures and dance steps to each other in my questions and his answers. In the analysis that follows, information from this extended Paris interview, which I recorded, will be referred to as ‘Paris interview 2017’ and for email and WhatsApp, I will mention the date of the exchange. These communications helped me to understand what Bhabananda considered ‘traditional’ and what he referred to as ‘composed’ or ‘for the tour’ in *Vrindavani Paal*; to what extent he had re-shaped material; and his consciousness of various discourses and practical constraints acting on his production. Bhabananda’s interviews, and my own ethnographic descriptions are situated in relation to broader discussions of the institutions, individuals and discourses we encountered and were influenced by. I draw together these various perspectives: as audience, producer, ethnographer, interviewer and scholar, to ask questions about the translation of value of *sattras* arts on their journey to becoming *Vrindavani Paal*.

Here I focus on eight different aspects of *Vrindavani Paal* in order to understand which *sattriya* arts—songs, artists, dance genres, objects, actions, costumes and instruments—have been toured and what are left behind. Which particular verses, stories, sections and sub-sections of these made the final cut? And what considerations motivate Bhabananda when transporting ‘traditional’ materials into a new performance piece? In his discussion of Sankaradeva’s adaptations of Sanskrit texts, Smith observes:

These are not translations in the modern sense of the word, since Shankaradeva condenses, adds color and new detail, and combines elements from different texts, thus in many cases transforming his translation into a new work. His language is colloquial rather than Sanskritized; his work is free-flowing and idiomatic, and he is not averse to humor. (Smith 2007: 166).

Though many of the movements, ritual elements, melodies and words which made up the dance were derived from the *sattras* of Assam, the way that Bhabananda arranged them and introduced new elements reflect his understanding of the values of those who enable a ‘Indian classical dance’ on tour in the UK. As I analyse *Vrindavani Paal*, I consider the aesthetic, strategic and pragmatic considerations which went into its creation. The numbered sections (for example 2.3) refer to sections of the dance

description in Appendix I. The time references (in the format hh:mm), refer to the position in the accompanying film.

Staging

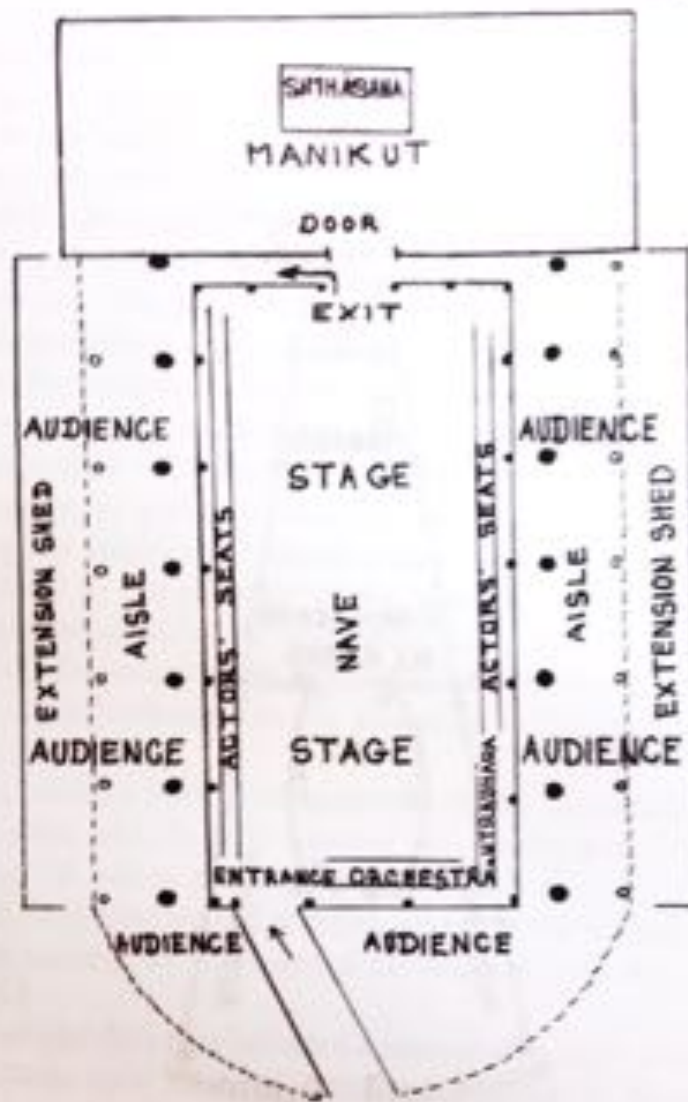
In this section I consider what attempts are made to re-create the *namghar* performance space and what changes are introduced in order to make the value of *sattriya* visible on a toured performance. Using images, diagrams and descriptions, I compare how objects, audience members, musicians and dancers are placed in relation to one another in *sattri* performance settings and in *Vrindavani Paal*.



Figure 3: Bhaona performance, Golaghat, May 2014. Photograph courtesy Kazu Ahmed



Figure 4: Bhaona performance showing location of musicians, Golaghat, May 2014. Photo courtesy Kazu Ahmed



INDICATIONS:

- Bamboo and Reed Wall
Removed for the Bhaona
- Massive Pillars of Wood
- o Wooden Side-Posts
- Temporary Bamboo Posts

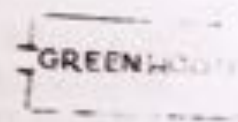


Fig. 1 : A Ground Plan of a Namghar Showing the Bhaona Stage, Auditorium and Greenroom



Figure 6: Performance in the Great Hall of the British Museum, July 8th, 2016.

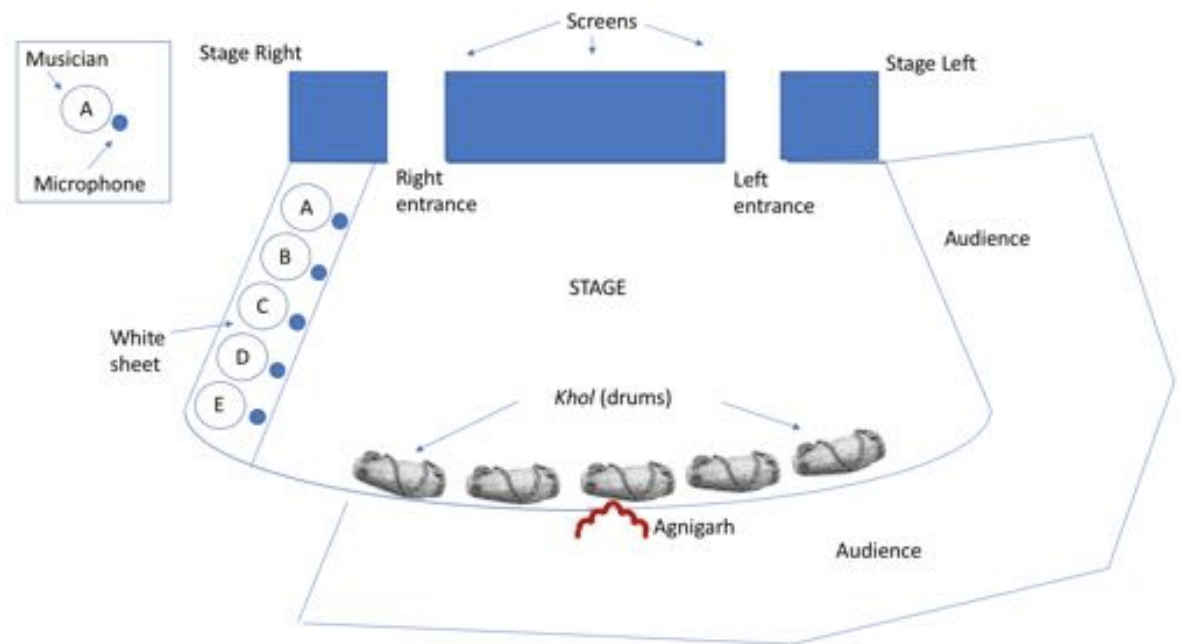


Figure 7: Diagram showing performance layout: Great Hall, British Museum, 8th July, 2016

As can be seen in Figure 3 and Figure 5, the performance space of a *namghar* is long and narrow. As discussed in Chapter Three, in UKS the *guru asana* (marked in Neog's

diagram as the *simha asana*,¹) is located at the far eastern end of the hall, in the *manikut*—the sacred space which can only be entered by particular *bhakats* once they have performed specific cleansing rituals at home. Performers mostly face eastward towards this holiest of places, and west-to-east is the predominant performance direction. In *bhaona*, actors can face in any direction, and frequently address each other, rather than the audience, though they occasionally turn to audience members seated on the floor along the long northern and southern sides of the *namghar*. There is usually no physical barrier between audience and actors (see Figure 3). According to M M Sarma and Dutta though in Bahesariya *bhaona*, festivals in which multiple *bhaona* are performed simultaneously in large temporary purpose-built structures, ‘The space kept for the spectators is separated from its adjacent acting area by a low fence of split bamboo. Such a physical barrier between the actors and the spectators is never seen in a *bhaona* held in a village prayer hall.’ (M M Sarma and Dutta 2009: 310-311). During large group dances, like *nadubhangi*, the performers move in a slow circle facing sometimes inwards, sometimes outwards.

Given what I had seen and read of *sattria* performance conventions, in planning the 2016 tour, I had assumed that large open expanses of space, such as the Great Hall of the British Museum, the courtyard between King’s College and Somerset House, and the Barn at Bury Court, would provide suitable spaces for a performance of *sattriya*. I pictured the audience sitting along two sides, and the performers dancing in the middle at ground level, as I had always seen in UKS. However, when I showed Bhabananda the space in the Great Hall of the British Museum, where I was intending for his troupe to perform on the first night of the tour, he was surprised, disappointed, and a little stressed. It was only later that I realised that he had been expecting a raised, proscenium-style stage. Bhabananda and the other performers quickly got to work along with the events staff to construct the performance space depicted in Figure 7: wider than long, and facing towards an audience on one side.² At Bhabananda’s request, two screens were placed in front of the stone wall of the reading room, which stands at the

¹ A description of the *guru asana* is given in Chapter Three. Neog refers to the same object as a *simha asana*, on account of the lion heads carved into each corner of the platform, *simha* being *sanskrit* for ‘lion’. (Neog 1965: 44)

² Jadumani, another member of the touring troupe, confirmed the group’s expectations of a proscenium-style stage, by asking where the stage lights were. I responded that none would be needed because of the timing and setting of the performance: at 6.30pm it would still be light in the glass-roofed building at the height of the British Summer (at 6.30pm in India, at the same time of year, the sun would have set).

centre of the Great Hall, to create a ‘back’ of the stage and an off-stage. A line of *khol* drums and the *agnigarh* archway (Figure 3, Chapter Five) demarcated the front edge of the performance space. Though the musicians, just as in *namghar* performances, remained visible throughout the performance, seated on sheets laid out along stage right, the actors disappeared behind the screens at the back of the stage between scenes. Using the western staging convention of keeping actors ‘backstage’ whilst inactive allowed the performers to change their costumes, which would not be necessary in a *namghar* context where actors play only one role and remain in the corresponding costume throughout. The audience was encouraged to sit in front of the line of *khol* drums, and though many people gathered to the left of the stage, the performance was predominantly towards the front. This meant a use of horizontal space more akin to the broad proscenium-style stage, rather than the ‘vertical’ dimensions of the *namghar* hall.

For the the Barn at Bury Court performance in Hampshire I had asked the owner-manager to seat the audience around three sides of the hall, corresponding to the north, south and east sides of the *namghar*. In the rush of the tour, I neglected to change this request, despite having observed that Bhabananda had designed *Vrindavani Paal* to fit the shape of a proscenium-style stage. On the night of the performance, during the interval, several members of the audience complained that they could not see what was happening, because the performers had their backs to them throughout the first half. I passed this on to Bhabananda who quickly made some changes to ensure that the dancers directed at least some action towards all three sides. Bhabananda had assumed that a tour in England would take place on proscenium stages and had adapted the *sattra* performance practices to fit; I had assumed it would look like what I had seen in the *namghar*, and had arranged mostly inappropriate performance spaces. In the Barn at Bury Court, the performers had to re-adapt to fit my notion of authenticity. In the Sage at Gateshead, on the last night of the tour, the artists performed on a classic, front-lit, proscenium-arch stage and their expectations were finally met.

What these processes of adaption and re-adaption reveal is that despite the fact that I had envisaged a tour based on my observations in UKS I had brought over a ‘stage-ready’ version: the translation from *namghar* performance to foreign tour had entailed a re-organisation of direction and shape along the lines of other ‘Indian Classical Dances’ and their adoption of specific Western staging conventions.

Entry Rituals and Props

Despite this re-shaping, many of the conventions which defined the *Vrindavani Paal* stage space—both physical and ritual-symbolic—were drawn from *sattrā* conventions.

Item 1: Mati Akhara, for example, creatively incorporates the rituals and objects associated with the musicians' and actors' entrances in traditional *bhaona*. Neog's description of such entries (first published in 1984, but witnessed during his research in the 1960s) still applies to contemporary *bhaona* productions I have seen at UKS and on YouTube.³

The fire-arch [*agnigarh*] is generally formed by holding two bamboo poles or light wooden beams joining each other at the top ends to form an obtuse angle, with a few small burning torches (*ariya*) of mustard oil stuck on it. The number of torches is 6, 9, 12, 14 or 21, each of these numbers being held sacred among the Vaishnavas. Another feature of the first entrance of the musicians is the holding of a screen (*ar-kapor*), generally white, by two persons in front of the party. This is spread out as the musicians enter the performance hall and is slowly taken forward as they advance step by step. When they take their position ready for action, the screen is removed amidst peals of rejoicing voices, *Jaya Hari bola, jaya Rama bola*, and the initial concert begins. (P Neog 2008: 201).

³ See, for example, the entrance of the actors at the start of a *bhaona* performance in Atila Gaon, Jorhat, Assam in the video posted online by Dutta 2016.



Figure 8: Agni-garh: 'First preliminary rituals of the drummers behind the arch of lights at Kaliabari-Sattrā and the stage' (Photograph and caption from Farley 1974)



Figure 9: Agni-garh 2: 'Agni-garh is the archway of light. (Photo: Courtesy of Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University)' Photograph and caption taken from M M Sarma and Dutta 2009: 305. Location not mentioned.

In *bhaona* productions, the *sutradhara*, the narrator-cum-stage director figure, enters the stage in a similar way—through the *agni-garh* and behind a white sheet. Important actors are announced one by one with an appropriate Sanskrit *sloka* and a *pravesa-gita* (a ‘song of entrance’):

‘With the recital of the Sanskrit verse the curtain is once again held in position. No sooner the song of entrance begins than the curtain is taken off and the hero appears, and the whole audience bows to him. As the song proceeds the hero dances round the stage [*pravesar nach*] and in the end takes his place in the corner [...] All the characters generally take their seats on the stage in close view of one another but in appropriate groups before the actual drama begins; and such of them, as have the occasion to speak or act, rise from their seats from time to time.’ (P Neog 2008: 207).⁴

Though in *Vrindavani Paal*, the entry of the musicians and the *sutradarh* figure (later played by Niranjan)⁵ were not marked with such ceremony, the ‘opening ritual’ (Item 1: Mati Akhara (1.1, 00:08 – 02:42)) is based on many of its ritual elements. For example, Jadumani’s entrance is concealed by a white sheet held by his co-performers. Also, the *agni-garh* (Figure 8 and Figure 9) is referenced in miniature form, in the object placed at the front of the stage (Figure 10).

⁴ This description is similar to Farley’s: ‘A special archway of lights (*angi-gad*) was raised just inside the entrance to the prayerhall. Such an arch is constructed of two bamboo sticks held upright and joined at the top by another stick of bamboo. Small lighted torches are placed in holes drilled at the top of the bamboo arch. The shape of the arch differs from place to place. As far as I know, it is not to be found anywhere else in India. The arch may symbolize the bridge between the physical and the spiritual world or merely the point of transition between the *maya* of the real world and that of the drama. Once the arch was firmly in place, a white curtain (*ar-kapor*) was stretched in front of it as members of the *gayana-vayana* orchestra made their entrance’ (Farley 1974: 150). This echoes M M Sarma and Datta’s description of the way *bhaona* is reproduced in the *besariya Bhaona* tradition: ‘As the drums stop, from each of the green rooms two men come to each acting area, carrying an arch of lights (*agni-garh*) made up of two bamboo sticks joined (Fig. 1). Nine small, lighted torches on the *angi-garh* symbolize the nine forms of devotion (*bhakti*). A white curtain is stretched in front of this arch and a group of musicians takes their position behind it. There are usually six barrel-shaped drums (*khol*), or four large cymbals (*bartal*), and ten singers, making a total of twenty performers in each group. As the curtain is removed, many devout Vaishnava spectators chant the name of Lord Vishnu to signal the transition from the mundane into the spiritual world. The musicians, dressed in white (*dhotis* [unstitched trousers], shirts, and turbans), pass through the arch and begin the preliminary instrumental music with its elaborate rhythms. This is an integral part of any *bhaona*, whether it is held in a village prayer hall or on a modern stage. The group of the acting area designated number one first sings and plays. Then the musicians slowly move in single file toward the sacred throne at the center...’ (M M Sarma and Dutta 2009: 304-5).

⁵ His role morphs from *oja* to *sutradhar* while on stage (at 30:16, between 3.1 and 3.2). There is therefore no formal ‘arrival’ of the *sutradhar* as there would be in a *bhaona* production.



Figure 10: Miniature 'agni-garh'

Though Bhabananda referred to this archway as an *agni-garh*, it differed in various ways—both physical and symbolic—from the bamboo arches of *bhaona*. It was made of carved wood, painted brightly and features carved heads of two creatures at either side,⁶ drawing from the style and visual conventions of the *guru asana*, the *namghar* ‘altar’ (described in Chapter Two) rather than of the plain, functional bamboo *agni-garh* used in *bhaona*. Though, like the *agni-garh*, the miniature archway was adorned with lamps, in *Vrindavani Paal*, they were placed as part of the performance, after, rather than before, the players entered. The miniature archway brought to London is also much smaller than the *agni-garh*, and the actors would not be able to pass underneath it. Built by Jagannath, a *bhakat* and professional carpenter in UKS, skilled in the art of making *guru asana*, the miniature *agni-garh* was designed to be carried as hand luggage, and assembled and disassembled easily. In both settings, the archways defined a separation between on-stage and off-stage, but whereas in the British Museum it served as a permanent boundary marker between the audience and the artists, in *bhaona* it stands behind the actors rather than between them and the spectators. Farley suggests that in *bhaona* the *agni-garh* is ‘a bridge between the physical and the spiritual world or merely the point of transition between the *maya* of the real world and that of the drama’ (Farley 1974: 157). In the touring performances of *Vrindavani Paal*, this archway also

⁶ According to Bhabananda these represent ‘*magar*’, also known as ‘mugger crocodiles’ or ‘marsh crocodiles’, which are considered sacred in parts of India and Sri Lanka.

acted as a *guru asana*, indicated by the fact that the entire performance was directed towards it, as is the case in *namghar* performances. Bhabananda confirmed this when I asked him if this *agni-ghar* was used in any other context than a foreign tour, by responding: ‘No, we use this only for touring and performance of outside of the Satra; inside of the Satra we have altar already’ (Paris interview 2017).

Though the *agni-garh* differed from its referent in its placing and appearance in the touring production, it carried much of the same symbolic value, in its role of shaping a performance space and time. Jadumani emerges from behind the white cloth holding a dish containing small lights. He moved forward with stylised ceremony and placed the lights on the *agni-ghar* in a ritual reminiscent of the lighting of mustard oil lamps that inaugurate Sattriya performances and events in Assam in general, so the *agni-garh* was used in a ritual that defined the commencement of performance time. I had warned Bhabananda in advance that burning mustard oil at the British Museum was likely to be forbidden on the grounds of health-and-safety regulations, so he brought electric lamps instead. Jadumani carried three lights which, Bhabananda explained to me, represented the ‘dedication of our deeds first to the Great Guru (Sankaradeva, the mentor of our arts), second to the stage where we perform, and third to the spectators who represent devotees of the ultimate entity.’⁷

Instruments

The instruments used in *Vrindavani Paal* which are also used in the *namghar* are *khol*, *nagara*, *bhortal*, *khuti tal* and voice. The flute, violin and electronic *tampura* (a synthesiser which replicates the sound of the strummed four-stringed instrument) have become typical in recitals of Sattriya dance performed in auditoriums, aligning the form more closely to recitals of other Indian classical dance forms, such as Bharatnatyam,

⁷ Bhabananda told me that usually, ‘The nine lights of the *agnighar* represent *nava bhakti* (nine kinds of devotion), which are: *sravana* (devotion through listening), *kirtana* (devotion through recitation), *smaran* (devotion through remembrance), *archana* (devotion through worship), *bandana* (devotion through invocation), *pada sevan* (devotion through service as a devotee), *daisya* (devotion through service as a servant), *sakhittwa* (devotion through service as a friend), *atmanivedan* (devotion through surrender of the soul).’ He also explained that the heads that are carved into the two sides of the *agni-garh* are of *magar*, marine creatures considered sacred in Assam. The black, yellow and red, represent ‘the three *guna* (human qualities): yellow for *sattva* meaning light, bliss and goodness; red for *rajas* meaning passion and motion and black for *tamas* meaning inertia and darkness. These explanations about the *agni-garh* were sent in an email dated 11th February, 2017.

Kathak and Manipuri. They are not, however, to be found in the *namghar*. The *sarinda*, the four-string bowed instrument which opens the performance at 1.1 (00:08) is neither to be found in the *sattrā* nor in classical recitals.⁸ According to Maheswar Neog:

In public performances of religious songs stringed instruments are not seen at all. But among individual singers and wandering minstrels the *vīṇ* (*vīṇā*), *dotārā* and *tokārī* are in vogue. Another instrument of the type is the *sārindā*... [which] seems to have been widely used in Assam at one time. It very often finds mention in the folk-songs of the province (Neog 1965: 288)⁹

In a WhatsApp exchange with Bhabananda on 7th February 2018, we discussed his decision to have the *sarinda* opening the British Museum presentation. The exchange reveals a number of connected concerns and influences which recur in Bhabananda's reflections on the production.

GP: I have never seen the *sarinda* in Uttar Kamalabari Sattrā. Is it a common instrument in *bhaona* or *borgeet*? Why did you decide to use it in the British Museum performance?

BB: According to the biographies of Sankaradeva, his niece Kamalapriya used *sarinda* whilst singing *borgeet*. But practically it cannot be found in any *sattrā*. As we have evidence from biography and also very local instrument used by Assamese Bodo community, I have been using this instrument since 2008. We wanted to introduce this instrument in British Museum's performance because it is a very local instrument and also we wanted to revive the tradition that Sankaradeva's niece started and which satras lost after.

GP: Did Dipendra already know how to play the *sarinda*, or did he learn it specially for this performance?

BB: As he has experience of violin, it's quite easy to learn. Of course he had to learn from traditional practitioner. He took training specially for the UK tour.

GP: That's interesting!

BB: As I am aware that you are also a string instrumental musician, you would love it if we could use a native instrument.

⁸ The *sarinda* is listed as an 'Assamese instrument' in various accounts. For example Barthakur 2003 and Borah 2005.

⁹ Neog also mentions an incident in which one of Sankaradeva's songs is apparently played on a *sarinda*: 'Śukladhvaja happened one day to overhear one of his wives singing [one of Śankara's songs] on the *sārindā*, and he lost no time in resolving to secure initiation into *bhakti*. (1965: 277).

Bhabananda's reflections on his use of the *sarinda* reveal a multifocal perspective, which comprehends discourses both from 'home', 'abroad' and encountered on route between the two. On the one hand Bhabananda is engaged with reviving an ancient form based on 'evidence from biography', by which he means the *caritas*—the sacred Assamese biographies of the saints. Like the revivals discussed in Chapters One and Three, Bhabananda looks to ancient texts, and a narrative of continuity with the past, to justify introducing what are in fact new elements into his art form. On the other hand, the inclusion of the *sarinda* contributes to a production intended for a particular audience. In our Paris interview, Bhabananda had expressed the need to put as many performance items as possible into a show destined for touring: 'if you are only given 90 minutes, and you only go to England once, you want to show as much as possible' (2017). Including the *sarinda* would therefore add variety to the performance for foreign audiences. Bhabananda also reflects here on how I, a co-producer of the tour who happens to be a harpist might regard the instrument as an object of interest. The term 'native instrument' describes the *sarinda* as an object of curiosity, even exotic interest, like the many other objects on display at the British Museum. It is introduced, by this logic, not only because it is a natural part of an authentic performance of Assamese culture, but because it is perceived as desirable and interesting to the foreign host and audience.

In both explanations, the symbolic value of the *sarinda* seemed to outweigh its aesthetic value, and this is reflected in the fact that it is only used during the first six minutes, during Item 1, after which Dipendra switches to playing a violin (06:14). Had the sound of the *sarinda* been what was desired, perhaps Bhabananda would have considered bringing the 'traditional practitioner' himself to play it, rather than having him teach it to the classically trained artist who came on the tour. However, there were a variety of reasons why this was not the case, which I will consider now.

Artists

The inclusion of the violinist/ *sarinda* player Dipendra Sharma in the tour was in fact significant for two other reasons, to do with the representation of the tour. It had come as quite a surprise to me when I looked at the list of performers Bhabananda had chosen

for the tour to discover that a non-monk was to be travelling with the troupe. In this case, too, just as with the question of performance space discussed above, I had assumed that what I was touring would bear closer resemblance to everything I had seen in UKS. Thus, I had assumed that the tour would involve only *bhakats* from UKS, and no one else. That assumption was reflected in my application to ACE, my communications with performance venues and schools, and all the marketing materials I had designed for the tour. The only other ‘non-monk’ in the tour troupe, Naren Baruah, had lived as a *bhakat* at UKS from his early childhood until 1999, so he had a clear association with the monastery, but Dipendra has always lived the life of a ‘householder’ in mainstream Assamese society. Whilst on tour, however, Dipendra and Naren’s identity as ‘non-monks’ were completely effaced. They travelled as part of the collective billed as the ‘Monks of Majuli’; dressed, ate and conducted themselves as *bhakats*, and during performance represented a monastic identity, wearing the same clothes, turban and beads which are worn in ritual performance. The performers themselves as *bhakats* and the tour production team referred to all the performers as ‘monks’ between ourselves and in marketing and stage announcements.¹⁰

What was the purpose, then, of bringing two ‘non-monks’ on a tour that was billed as a monastic troupe? It became clear through comments and statements from several artists involved in the tour that the decision was strategic as well as aesthetic. Naren has received recognition from the Indian government for his contribution to Sattriya dance, and is versant both in the performance practices acquired in the monasteries over many years (unavailable to most urban learners) and the urban, classical variety which he teaches in Guwahati and performs throughout India (not readily available to monastic practitioners). Involving a recognised classical dancer and Dipendra, a classically trained musician in the troupe, helped to bolster the image of *Vrindavani Paal* as a ‘classical’ performance, a recurring concern for the proponents of this recently acknowledged Classical dance form. I also understood that the employment of two ‘non-monk’s was also politically expedient. It was important to avoid presenting the tour troupe as a delegation representing UKS because, as I was told by a number of different performers, it was wrong to use the name of the monastery if the tour was not

¹⁰ Naren’s ‘non-monk’ status was only revealed once publically. At one of the secondary schools we visited in Newcastle, a student asked if it was possible to leave the monastery, and Bhabananda used Naren as an example of someone who left but who maintains a good relationship with the institution. Dipendra was not present at this workshop.

institutionally sanctioned. Doing so would mean that the direction and control of the tour would technically fall to the senior members of the *sattrā*, rather than Bhabananda. To this end, I was specifically asked not to use the name of the monastery in programme notes and marketing materials. Including highly skilled professional artists like Dipendra and Naren from outside the monastery contributed to this sense that the tour troupe was a collection of talented individuals from the state of Assam, rather than of representatives of UKS.

Whatever the motivation for including Dipendra as the *sarinda* player, the end result has much in common with the broader processes of classicisation discussed in Chapter Three, in which an art form is appropriated from a ‘traditional practitioner’, performed by a ‘classical artist’ and seen in historical terms, rather than with reference to current practice. The non-monastic community who still play the instrument (the Bodos) are effectively written out of this narrative.

Performance Item 1: *Mati Akhara*

Though the term *mati akhara* is generally translated into English as ‘ground exercises’,¹¹ the terms used to define this practice, as well as the context of its use, have changed in recent years in line with the classicisation of the dance form. Whilst in Neog’s work the term described ‘exercises meant for the learners of dance in *sattras*’ (P Neog 2008: 160), contemporary writers define *mati akhara* as the ‘grammar’ or ‘basic vocabulary’ of Sattriya dance, encompassing dance sequences as well as stretches and yogic positions. Such a definition elides the fact that many positions although referred to as ‘*mati akhara*’ positions, would never be performed during a Sattriya dance, for example *khosoka*, pictured in Figure 11:

¹¹ Though *akhara* (अखाड़ा) in modern Hindi is usually translated as ‘gymnasium’ or ‘place of board and lodging for a particular sect’ and in Urdu (اکھڑا) as ‘stage’.



Figure 11: Demonstration of Koshok position (photo and caption from J Goswami and Kothari 2013: 52).

Most contemporary descriptions of *mati akhara* mention sixty-four positions divided into eight subcategories: *ora* (standing stances), *chata/ saata* (movements between different stances, changing the *hasta*), *jalak* (similar to *chata*) *sitika*, *pak* (turn) *jap* (jump) *lon* (back bends) and *khora* (turning or rolling the body).¹² Though the subcategories are frequently listed, it is rare to find an account that breaks them down further, or lists all 64 positions. Some movements – including *morai pani khowa* and *kachai pani kowa*, both used in the *mati akhara* section which opens *Vrindavani Paal* (at 1.2.9 and 1.2.10), do not fit easily into any category. Though *sattria* dance vocabulary has developed over centuries, these attempts to isolate and categorise movement patterns are part of the twentieth-century revival processes, which seek to align *sattriya* arts with ancient *shastric* treatises. The *natyashastra* delineates 108 ‘*karanas*’, which describe (but for many classical dance revivalists are seen to *proscribe*) the ‘basic units of dance’ (see for example Banerji 1985: 21). Demonstrating a scientific structure for *sattriya* arts along similar lines thus bolsters its classical credentials, demonstrates its complexity, and also builds a curriculum for those learning Sattriya privately, in academies. Though it is often asserted that *mati akhara* ‘forms the basic foundation in the training of a Sattriya dancer,’ (sattriyakristi.com) most dancers, both within and beyond the monasteries, only master those movements and positions

¹² This list and some descriptions are taken from Kothari 2013: 52-53. I have added more detail based on my own embodied knowledge of some movements, as well as a detailed ‘Sattriya Dance Tutorial’ on YouTube (Saika 2017). Various websites and publications copy the same list of subcategory headings (*jap*, *cholak* etc) but without descriptions.

which are used in dance, neglecting the gymnastic categories of *lon* and the *khori*, including *kati khori* ‘like a cartwheel’ (J Goswami and Kothari 2013: 63) which do not fit comfortably with the oft-repeated notion of Sattriya as a ‘*lasya*,’ (a *shastric* term for dance sequences considered soft, feminine) dance form and an act of *bhakti*, rather than of entertainment. They are also only achievable with very flexible, highly-trained bodies, so are the most likely to be neglected by adult or amateur learners.¹³

Within UKS *mati akhara* has two principal uses: scholastic and performative. On the one hand, the young monks are taught by their *adhiyapak* or teachers to respond to *bol* sequences with the gymnastic positions for strength and flexibility as well as the dance sequences that will form the basis of group dances. On the other hand, the more acrobatic *mati-akhara* positions are performed in groups to songs and *khori/bol* sequences¹⁴ for tourists visiting UKS. I was told by various *bhakats* there that performing such positions to music was a new phenomenon, practised only since the late nineties and associated with the process of achieving classical recognition.¹⁵

The *mati akhara* sequence at the opening of *Vrindavani Paal*, though not part of the classical stream of Sattriya described above is not therefore untouched by the processes of classicisation which created it. Its function in the British Museum performance involved further recontextualisation: in this setting, *mati akhara* was recast as an opening ritual, a spiritual ‘preliminary’ like the *dhemali* of *bhaona* which sanctified the performance space. Jadumani’s bearing and expression; the lighting of the lamps and his slow performance of *mati akhara* created an atmosphere of reverence. This intention was communicated in the programme notes. His performance was also a display of virtuosity and beauty which helped to draw and impress the audience from the outset.

¹³ Children I observed in UKS seemed to enjoy practicing and showing off these positions. The way they consolidated their learning through play, beyond the formal setting of ‘dance training’, helped me to understand how such movements might be hard to learn by amateur dancers for whom learning time is compartmentalised and limited. See Chapter Two for more discussion of this.

¹⁴ These *bol* sequences are demonstrated (and transcribed in Assamese and Roman script) in Saikia 2017.

¹⁵ The performance of acrobatic postures in temples of Assam is not limited to post-revival *sattria* culture, however. As discussed in Chapter Three, Neog wrote about a now extinct dance form practised by artists descended from ‘three families of *bayan* or *khori*-player, *gayan* or cymbal player and singer and nati or danseuse brought over from the siva temple of Dergaon-Negheriting [to the *Pariharesvara Siva* temple in Dubi] for providing music and dancing at appointed hours.[...] Among different movements of the body in the dance the most prominent are the *khat* (somersault) *tangal mochara* (literally, the wringing of a bamboo rope, the movement consisting of taking [sic] the body in order to touch the ground behind with the palms of the two hands), *khud* (bowing down with the hands stretched forward to touch the ground).’ P Neog 2008: 343-4

According to Bhabananda, though the movements were non-mimetic, this performance was intended to ‘give a sense of the infinite entity which is what the text of the songs convey’.¹⁶ The piece was also included to contribute to the diversity of the performance. It is the only solo performance in *Vrindavani Paal* and also demonstrates positions which would not form part of the dances which would follow.

Performance Item 2: The ‘Vandana’

In recitals of classical Indian dance, it is typical to start with a solo or duet in which the dancer responds to the words of a live or recorded *vandana*, through *abhinaya*: facial expressions and gestures which make visible the descriptions of beauty, strength, bravery of the object of their praise, and the adoration, love and joy felt by the worshipper. In UKS, there is no dance form referred to as a *vandana*, or which exactly conforms to its structure. For this item, Bhabananda created a composition which used vocabulary from the non-mimetic genre of *jhumura* – a group dance practised by monks at the start of their monastic training, and the hand gestures and mimetic performance vocabulary of *oja pāli*, the only art form which uses meaningful hand symbols in the *sattrā* setting, and *pada* (footwork) and some *cata* (pure dance phrases) from the *matī akhara* repertoire. Including this piece in *Vrindavani Paal* immediately establishes that the performance is shaped in line with the norms of an Indian classical dance recital.

Descriptions of Sattriya as a dance which has ‘originated in the *sattras* of Assam,’ as discussed in Chapter Three, overlook the fact that the dances which are performed on stage have gone through intense changes between the monastic and the stage setting. Here I discuss how *jhumura* is used and altered in the creation of this Sattriya *Vandana*. In the context of the monastery *jhumura* ‘is performed by three to four artists in a row facing the *guru āsana*. Like *cali nach*, it has three main sections: *rāmdāni*, *gītār* and *melā*’ (Barbayan 2016: 71). The first section of the *ramdani*, usually in the rhythmic cycle of *thukani tala*, accompanies a slow section in which the monk prostrates himself on the ground, bowing first towards the holy book at the eastern end of the *namghar*, then to the potential and actual audience to his left and right. Dancers’ movements are parallel and identical. *Jhumura* dances take thirty to forty-five minutes to perform and are accompanied by songs by Madhavadeva and Sankaradeva specifically associated

¹⁶ Personal correspondence, 11th February 2011.

with the form. The dancers do not interpret the words of the songs through mime and gesture: as with all the performance forms of the *sattrā* except for *oja pāli*, *abhinaya* is completely absent from contemporary monastic *jhumura*.¹⁷ The dances are accompanied by the voices of other monks, the *khol*-drum and *bhortal* (large cymbals).

In order to create the new dance—the ‘*vandana*’ that was performed at the British Museum—Bhabananda presented aspects of *jhumura* in a radically altered format. In its *vandana* avatar, the *jhumura* became a duet, performed to melodic instruments, a *tanpura* and, as above, a non-monastic performer. Whilst *jhumura* costumes in the *sattrā* are usually identical and non-gender-specific¹⁸ though *jhumura* is considered a ‘male’ dance, in the British Museum, the two dancers embodied ‘male’ and ‘female’ and dressed accordingly.¹⁹ Unlike *jhumura*, in which dancers’ moves are parallel and identical: Bhabananda always returned to *purush ora*, understood as a male standing position and Mukunda returned to a variation of *prakriti ora*, the female stance. In certain tableaux and dance moves, the pair would embody male and female characters: at 2.1.11, for example (See Figure 12) Bhabananda plays Krishna, and Mukunda his ardent devotee.²⁰

¹⁷ Ghanakanta Bora makes a case for *abhinaya* having had a much broader application in *sattras* in the past, but that it ‘gradually began to take a back seat in these ritual performances, and practice in *abhinaya* in a consistent way ceased to be adhered to while imparting training, except in respect to Ojapali.’ (2013: 81).

¹⁸ They wear a *lahonga* or *ghuri* - a skirt worn from the waist to the ankle - , a *tongali*, a long piece of cloth like a *gamosa* tied around the waist as a belt; a *baikon* a short transparent shirt, and a white *paguri* or turban, *motamoni* around the neck, *gam kharu* on the wrists, and *kundal* earrings. (email from Bhabananda on 11th February 2017)

¹⁹ Bhabananda was dressed in a white *dhoti* with a blue and golden border and matching *chadar* (sash, worn over one shoulder). His hair was tied up inside a white *paguri* (turban), pointed at the front, and adorned with a *bakul phular mala*. A *bakul phular mala* is ‘a garland made from the *Mimus Opsele* King of Flower... This specific garland originally taken from *namghar* or *satradhikar* as *nirmali* (holy offering as gesture of blessing) in traditional system of the *sattrā*, this offering obtain as per qualification of the performer: the *Barbayan*, *Bargayan* and *Bar Oja* get two garlands at the same time, whereas other performers get one. But in outside performance we take one per performer as symbolic.’ (email from Bhabananda on 11th February 2017)

²⁰ When asked, Bhabananda said ‘maybe it’s Radha, maybe it’s his lover, maybe it’s his wife’ (Paris interview 2017).



Figure 12: Bhabananda as Krishna; Mukunda the devotee (16:13)

The content of the dance was also re-structured in several ways. To make a thirteen-minute dance from a forty-minute dance, Bhabananda had to be selective. He used short small sections of *jhumura* and these were mostly taken from the 25-part *mela* sequences which make up the end of *jhumura* dances. He also left out the ‘invocation’ gestures usually performed at the beginning of the *ramdani*, as its role, he told me, had already been played by the ritualistic *mati akhara* section which preceeded it. Instead of *thukani tal*, the dance opened in *sut kola tal*, traditionally used in *bahr* or *sutradhari* dances in the monasteries, rather than *jhumura*, in order to move more seamlessly into the following section in the same *tal*. At various points, Bhabananda also introduced ‘pure dance’ movements from outside *jhumura* dance conventions. For example, whilst in a *namghar* performance, the invocation would be performed at the centre of the stage, to a specific rhythm played on the *khol*; in *Vrindavani Paal*, the dancers used that same rhythmic section to move from the stage door to take up their positions on the stage. This traverse required the introduction of a string of ‘pure dance’ moves choreographed by Bhabananda (see 2.1: 06:36). Similarly, the counter-clockwise turn leading to *purush ora/ prakriti ora* at 12:36 is choreographed specifically to create a transition between two sections and does not form part of *jhumura nach*. In the *gitar* section of a *jhumura*, when the musicians start to sing, the dancers continue to perform pure dance, but in *Vrindavani Paal*, the dancers gave detailed mimed expositions of the words of the songs

performed by the musicians. The first song - Megha Syamala – is performed almost exclusively as *abhinaya*, with only a few short phrases or *chata* found in *jhumura* and other pure dances (for example *urachata* or *thiyochata* at 2.2.2 and twice at 2.2.3). The second song – Mdhudanava Darana – splices sections of *abhinaya* which describe each verse as it is sung, with *jhumura* sections set between verses (at 2.2.3 2.2.5 2.2.7 2.2.9 2.2.11 and 2.2.13).

Performance Item 3: ‘Vrindavani Paal’

The third section of Bhabananda’s choreography, the 30-minute title piece ‘Vrindavani Paal’, is a dance-drama that has, like the *vandana*, never been performed in the monasteries of Assam. Unlike the *vandana*, however, versions of which feature regularly in Sattriya performances in India, the ‘Vrindavani Paal’ was also unique to the UK tour, choreographed specifically with a British Museum audience in mind.

The dance-drama consists of four sections: the first draws from the Assamese danced-narrative form *oja pāli* and the last three from the dance-drama form *Bhaona*. Before the second and third sections, the *oja* makes short narrative interventions like the *sutradhar*—narrator figure—of *bhaona* performances.

i. *Ojā Pāli* style

The first section of part three of *Vrindavani Paal* is based on the style of *ojā pāli* practised in UKS (in turn, adapted from Vyahar *oja pāli*)²¹ Sattriya *ojā pāli* performances include a number of elements. According to Borah, the performance is divided into five parts: ‘Raga, Shloka, Geet, Diha and Pada.’ (page 47). The raga section is subdivided into ‘Raga Malita and Raga Charana’ (p. 50): the ‘Malita’ describes the raga in words, whilst the ‘Charana’ (*caron/ saron*) explores the notes and mood of the raga firstly using meaningless syllables, and then moving into a song. Next comes the *sloka*, a verse ‘always in praise of Krishna, found in the published text of

²¹ B Goswami cites Nātha’s edition of Daityāri’s *carita* (biography of the saints) to prove that Sankaradeva used the already existing *oja pāli* format to ‘preach the new Vaishnavism’ (Nātha 1999). I.e. the form pre-dates Sankaradeva. (B Goswami 1997: 97). Likewise K Bora (2013: 47) states: ‘The Sattras adopted elements from Vyahar Ojapali to embellish the grammar of Sattriya dance-drama and music for the worship of Vishnu or Krishna.’

Sankaradeva's songs in praise of Lord Krishna in the *Kirtana Ghosha*.²² Then comes the Geet – a *borgeet* (song) interpreted through *abhinaya* (mimetic gestures) the Diha, or *ghosha*, a couplet from the 'Caturvimsati Avatara'.²² After all this comes the Pada: the recitation of verses on Vaishnava themes. Borah further subdivides the recitation of *pada* under the following seven terms: 'Paton, Kathan, Bana, Pada Jurani, Dhura, Badya Kiali, Upadesh'.²³ To these, Bhabananda adds the element '*sansaro*', which is when the *ojā* elaborates on the main theme using theatrical gestures and words not within the poem itself.

The *oja pāli*-inspired section in Bhabananda's *Vrindavani Paal* enacts verses selected from the first two verse sequences of Sankaradeva's poem 'Caturvimsati Avatara', in the *Kirtan Ghosha*, a collection of the saint's poetry.²⁴ It diverges from formal descriptions of Sattriya *ojā pāli* in a number of ways. Firstly, it introduces an opening violin solo and electronic *tanpura* at 3.1.1 (19:54). Secondly, at 3.1.2 (20:24) in *VP* the *pāli* dance onto stage and then for a short time facing the audience. In traditional *oja pāli*, the *pāli* would not make a danced entry – they would start dance movements from a static position surrounding the *ojā*. Thirdly, the *pāli* dance at 3.1.3 (22:06), before the *raga* has been explored vocally, whereas in formal descriptions, the *raga* section always happens first. Fourthly, in *VP* the singing is accompanied by the violin, whilst in the *namghar*, singing would be accompanied by percussive instruments *khol* and *khuti tāl*, or no instrumentation at all. Fifthly, in *VP* there is no *geet* section. The *Pada*, the main body of the performance, is, according to Bhabananda, 'traditional', except that instead of an *upadesh* section, where the *oja* would traditionally offer 'advice or a sermon on the human soul' at the end of the performance, the *ojā* repeats the *ghosha* '*ki korila...*' (3.1.12, 21:53) and then moves into the dramatic section which

²² From the *Kirtana Ghosha* (C Mahanta 1990).

²³ B Goswami lists most of these elements in his thesis, but using slightly different terms, and without representing elements as subdivisions: 'ragadiya or alapa, sloka, gita, diha, thiya- patan, raga-malita, carana, vadya-khiyali, dhura, bana and upadesa' (B Goswami 1997: 218). Bhabananda mentions most of these elements in his description of the elements of *oja pāli* (in Barbayan 2016), but also in a different order: 'First comes the Pāton, which consists of Rag-diya, Sloka, Gita and Diha, followed by 'Pada Gowa or Pal', which consists of Malita, Carana and Dhura. He then lists Bādyā-khyālī ('part of the Dhura'), Kathan (used occasionally, throughout), Pada-jurani (a 'short melody in the main part of the text to emphasize the importance of an upcoming matter') Bana (the melody the Pada is sung to) and Upadesa (concluding remarks by the *oja*).'

²⁴ Sankaradeva's writings were compiled by his principal disciple Madhadeva. I have used Chandrakanta Mahanta's English-language translation (C Mahanta 1990).

would not be a part of *oja pāli*. This represents an innovative combination of *oja pāli* with *bhaona*-style costumed dramatic action which is unique to *Vrindavani Paal*.

The *raga* section (divided into *malita* and *cāron*: 22:06 – 24:09) is structurally and musically ‘traditional’—i.e. as described in formal accounts, and understood by Bhabananda as inherited knowledge— but Bhabananda adds some footwork and style:

I don’t change anything, only I tried to do the practice for the perfection, for more grace [...] Normally our pālis do less things. I add [more] pāli [movements]; I put some movements here, for looking good.’²⁵

These artistic additions are all within the framework of conventional oja dancing: the oja’s role, according to B Goswami is to make ‘dancing movements with appropriate gestures and mudras keeping harmony with the songs. After setting the refrain the Oja makes dancing movements while the pāli repeat the refrain. He occasionally shows bhava to expound and to elaborate his songs in the midst of singing.’ (B Goswami 1997). The nature of these dancing movements, however, seems open to interpretation, and is not strictly governed by convention. Bhabananda explained to me:

What the oja does here [he refers to 3.1.3, the *cāron* at 23:12 – 23:53, where Niranjan mimes as if playing a khol drum]: traditionally we don’t do. We add these things. It’s to show the audience that we are singing a rhythm. Also I put some foot movement for both the oja and the pāli. Sometimes they have coordinated footwork [in usual performances of oja pāli] but not a lot.’ (Paris interview 2017).

In its full form, the *Caturvimsati Avatara* describes twenty-four avatars of Vishnu, with a verse dedicated to each avatar. In *Vrindavani Paal*, Bhabananda uses only those verses which describe avatars depicted in the British Museum’s ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ textile (Matsya the fish: Verse 2; Kurma the tortoise: Verse 3; Varaha the boar: Verse 4; Narasimha – half man half lion: Verse 5; Vamana the dwarf: Verse 7; Parasuram the hero with the axe: Verse 7 and Rama the hero of the Ramayana: Verse 9)

ii. Dramatic Episodes

²⁵ Paris Interview 2017.

The middle two sections of Item 3—the enactment of ‘Bakasura Badha’, the killing of the crane demon Bakasura (3.2, 30:17 – 34:42) and ‘Kaliya Damana’, the subduing of the serpent demon Kaliya (3.3, 34:42 – 44:40)—are based on Sankaradeva’s interpretation of the Krishna Leela stories as told in the Bhāgavata Purāna, and are in the style of *bhaona*. These particular episodes were chosen by Bhabananda because they are referenced in in the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ (see figures 1 and 2). Some weeks before the UK tour, and after multiple requests from Bhabananda for high resolution images of the British Museum’s textile, I sent Bhabananda Richard Blurton’s book *Krishna in the Garden of Assam* (2016), a close examination of the textile published by the British Museum to coincide with its exhibition of the same name. Bhabananda carefully studied it and choreographed *Vrindavani Paal* based on Blurton’s analysis of the textile.



Figure 13: Krishna vanquishing the crane-demon Bakasura. (Left) Detail from the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’ (Right) dramatic episode in *Vrindavani Paal*



Figure 14: Krishna dancing on the hood of the many-headed snake demon Kaliya: (Left) Detail from the Vrindavani Vastra; (Right) dramatic episode in Vrindavani Paal

Given the time constraints of the tourable variety-style performance that Bhabananda had created, and his sense of audience taste, Bhabananda only used selective parts of *bhaona* and what he did use, he pared down.²⁶ *Bhaona* can be all night affairs, but *Vrindavani Paal* shortened and re-arranged its conventional components, content, splicing it with other *sattriya* performance practices. For example, *bhaona* performances start with ‘preliminaries’ – songs, prayers and *gayan bayan* performances (drumming and dancing) which warm up the audience and prepare the stage for the sacred episodes from the lives of Krishna or Ram which will proceed.²⁷ In *Vrindavani Paal*, *gayan bayan* is performed at the end of the performance (as discussed below), but Items 1 and 2 play the role of ‘preliminaries’ or ‘*prastavana*’, as is made clear in the programme notes: ‘The first two items are performed as a *prastavana*, a ‘prelude’ to

²⁶ According to Joan Erdman, Uday Shankar would do the same: ‘The Indian audiences of connoisseurs and elites expected lengthy (and often late-starting) performances, but for both Shankar’s western publics and the westernized elites in India for whom he later gave programs, the expectation was of limited duration and theatrically grand settings. Since it was the dance movement itself which had to entertain, rather than the sung text or subtlety or quality of a performance style too strange to comprehend, short dances in quick succession with costume changes and distinctive melodies kept the audience’s attention.’ Erdman, J. ‘Performance as translation,’ p. 83.

²⁷ For a detailed description of ‘preliminaries’ see P Neog 2008 195-201.

prepare the *rangabhumi* (performance space) and to invoke god: the ultimate creator, preserver and destroyer of personal entities.’²⁸

A more micro-level example of reducing and re-ordering *bhaona* material for *Vrindavani Paal* can be found at 3.2.3 (30:52-32:32) when Krishna and Baloram perform a version of a *gohain praveshar nach*, ‘the dance that is presented by the main characters like Krishna or Rama just after entering the stage with his friends.’²⁹ According to Bhabananda, the *gohain praveshar nach* is conventionally a three-part dance: ‘first dance that accompanies songs [A], second dance performed after the songs [B] and third dance with *sloka* [Sanskrit verses; C]’.³⁰ In *Vrindavani Paal*, only parts A and B are performed, and in the order ABABA rather than one after the other, with the three sections of dance to song (A) divided with sections of a different style danced without (B) (at 31:29 – 31:39 and 32:09 – 32:18). The song which accompanies dance A was written by Bhabananda especially for *Vrindavani Paal*. ‘The Bakasura Badha episode we don’t have in *ankiya naat* [*Bhaona*]³¹ so, I composed the text to a tune taken from a *pravesha geet* [entry song of Lord Krishna in *bhaona*].’³²

In Bhabananda’s choreographic note about the *Vrindavani Paal*, he wrote:

The idea behind this pilgrimage of mine is to choreograph a dance-sequence on the theme of Vrindavani Vastra, the fabric about Vrindavana. It is not a mere fabric, it was instrumental for our Guru Sankaradeva in setting up a new order in the parochial faction ridden society by transmuting it into a classless society.

Bhabananda’s vision of the textile is akin to the accounts we find in Das Gupta (1982) and Neog (1965): a legendary woven cloth, created by Sankaradeva. But, as we saw from my account in Chapter Four, the mechanisms which would enable Bhabananda to tour France and finally gain entry to the UK, were closely linked to the exhibition of the ‘Vrindavani Vastra’, named by Crill and validated by the British Museum. It was important to him to engage with *this* object, even if it did not fit the knowledge he

²⁸ Programme notes for British Museum event, by Bhabananda Barbayan. Edited by me and then by Freddie Matthews, Head of Adult Learning, British Museum before printing.

²⁹ Paris interview 2017. See also Kothari 2013: 90-91.

³⁰ Paris interview 2017.

³¹ Neog (amongst others) distinguishes ‘Ankiya Nat’ from ‘Bhaona’, saying that the former describes only those plays by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva (2008: 208), whereas the latter describes any Vaishnava drama performed in a similar style. I have found that this distinction is not reflected in common parlance. David Buchta, Sanskritist at Brown University, points out that Ankiya Nat simply refers to one-act plays, and does not define authorship (personal correspondence, January 2018).

³² Email from Bhabananda on 31st October 2018.

brought with him. Whilst Bhabananda's *Vrindavani Paal* was ostensibly based on an ancient artefact from his 'home' – the choreography was fact shaped according to a notion of 'Vrindavani Vastra' which has been over-written by recent western scholarship. Had he produced a dance based on the accounts of the *vr̥ndāvāni vastra* discussed in Chapter Four, the *oja pāli* section might have, for example, drawn from the tales of Krishna's earlier life found in the *Kirtan Ghosha*, such as the Sisu-Lila, Rasa Krida, Kamsavada, Gopi Uddhava Samvada, Kujir Vancha Purana and Akrurar Vancha Purana, from the Purvardha of the Bhagavata Purana (mentioned in Neog 1965: 161).

Performance Item 5: Gayan Bayan

Gayan Bayan is used to describe a performance practice cultivated in the monasteries which involves songs sung by a line of singers playing *bhortal*, and large groups of monks dancing while playing the *khol*. *Gayan bayan* demonstrations usually open *bhaona* performances, and precede other dance performances in the *namghar*.³³ For example, in the month of *bhadra* (the fifth month of the Assamese calendar, and equivalent to mid-August to mid-September), in 2016, I witnessed *gayan bayan* demonstrations preceding performances of *nadu bhangi* (September 2nd) *behar nitro* (September 3rd) and *cali nach* (September 14th). I have also observed *Gayan Bayan* performed in the *namghar* as an independent item for tourists who visit the *sattrā* (in April 2013, 2014, 2015 and August 2015). It is virtuosic, non-mimetic, and appeals to a wide audience. There are, according to Bhabananda, twelve different types of *gayan bayan*, referred to by Bhabananda as '*dhemali*'.³⁴ Item 5 of *Vrindavani Paal*

³³ 'It is a common practice to begin a performance with *gāyan-bāyan* in the *Satras* and villages of Assam.' (Barbayan 2016: 82).

³⁴ *Dhemali* is a general term which is used to refer to all the songs and performance items which precede the drama proper in *bhaona* performances. Neog translates *dhemali* or *dhaimali* as 'preliminaries', and equates the practice to the *purva ranga* which precede Sanskrit dramas. For example, in P Neog 2008, '*dhemali*' are: 'preliminary music and dance performances to a dramatic performance or *bhaona*, which may be equated to *purva-ranga*.' (455). However, variants of the term *dhamali* which refer to folk and popular music and dance practices from other parts of India point to a broader range of related performance activity. For example, *dhamal dandiya* is a popular participatory dance performed in Gujarat, a *tāl* played on the Panjabi *dhol* drum and the Rajasthani *chang* drum, particularly during the festival of Holi and *dhamail* or *dhamal* describes a musical form practised in and around Sylhet, Bangladesh, famously by the 19th-century musician Radharaman Dutta. In the 2007 Hindi comedy *Dhamaal*, the chorus of the song 'Dekho Dekho Dil Ye Bole', invites the listeners: 'Come on baby, let's do the *dhamaal*' and in this scene, the cast perform a racy Bollywood dance number, replete with scantily dressed European women. In the same film, during the song 'Miss India Martee Mujhpe', the singer

incorporates sequences from two of these: *Na dhemali* ('new dhemali' P Neog 2008: 456)³⁵ and *Ram dhemali*. Bhabananda explains the context of their performance and formal structure in an article in *Nartanam*:

Na-dhemāli is performed in the evening of the *mul-kīrttana*.³⁶ Presentation procedure of the first part of *na-dhemāli* is almost similar to *barpeṭīya-dhemāli* [another type of *gayān bayān*], however, dance technique is quite elaborate, also *Saṅcār*-s as well as *Cāhini*-s. The second part commences with *rāga* followed by *rāg-saṅcār*. [...] *Rām-dhemāli* is played before *bar-prabeśar-nāc* in the evening of *thāpani*. (Barbayan 2016: 85).

Both these types of *gayān bayān* are performed in four parts, termed by Bhabananda as *bahā-cāhini*, *thiya-cāhini*, *dhemāli* and *guru-ghāt* (ibid.: 85). As with Item 3, Item 5 of *Vrindavani Paal* demonstrated a selective use and placement of performance elements, on the one hand, and an internal re-structuring of these elements, on the other. For example, whilst, in traditional *bhaona* productions, the main action would be proceeded with a performance of *gayān bayān*, in *Vrindavani Paal*, it came at the end. The reason for this was twofold. Firstly, as Bhabananda and I discussed before the performance, this order corresponded more closely with the expectations of western audiences, where the 'grand finale' usually occurs at the end of the action, rather than the beginning. Secondly, this placing was practical in a touring party of only eleven. In *bhaona* productions, *gayān bayān* would be performed by one group of people, whilst the actors playing Krishna, the Sutradahr, the demons and so on, would be played by others. In the tour, many of the players doubled as actors and *gayān bayān* performers. Bhabananda felt that having *gayān bayān*—the most physically exacting style—at the end would avoid performers having to change into the elaborate costumes of the drama and proceed straight into more dancing. In addition to its re-positioning, the *gayān bayān* performance was also internally reshaped. It used only two of the four conventional elements of a *gayān bayān* demonstration, and brought in a third 'revived' element. The two 'conventional' elements were *bahā cahini*—the section performed half-kneeling on the ground (51:27-53:27)—and *dhemali* (53:27-59:14), the vigorous dance where the

repeats the word '*dhamaal*' in a chorus which is then followed by a short percussive section in *dhamaal tāl* (Kumar 2007).

³⁵ Na-dhemali is, according to Neog, 'said to have been introduced by Madhavadeva or someone after him.' (P Neog 2008: 456).

³⁶ '*mul-kīrttana*' is the third day of the *trithi* – the four-day death anniversary of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Day 1 is *sawol bhojani*, day 2 is *thaponi*, day 3 is *mul-kīrttana* and day 4 is *bhagonin* (fieldnote diary, September 4th, 2015).

bhakats play the *khol* while making complex foot and hand movements and sometimes leap and spin with their instruments. For the ‘third element’, inserted within this *dhemali* section (from 56:58 – 58:01), Bhabananda plays multiple *khol* drums at the centre of the stage. This practice finds mention in one of the biographies of the saints:

A biographer Ramacarana, tells us that in the performance of the *Cinha-yatra* Sankaradeva played on nine *kholes* at a time in the *deva-dhemali*. Similar feats are nowadays shown by skilful *vayanas* in course of the *bar-dhemali*, which parh [sic] suggests a merger of *deva-dhemali* in the *har-dhemali* in recent times. There are some musicians who profess to have the skill of playing on sixteen *kholes* at times (P Neog 2008: 456).

This shortened *gayan bayan*, played at the end of the performance with this multi-instrumental ‘feat’, as Neog puts it, provided a spectacular and energetic finale to *Vrindavani Paal*, which elicited enthusiastic applause at every performance on the UK tour. Using this performance item as a finale was Bhabananda’s way of arranging already existing material in the way he imagined its value could be ‘made visible’ by a western audience.

Choreographing value for Western audiences and Indian Funders

As co-producer of the tour, and in possession of a ‘rider’ long in advance, I was well aware that Bhabananda would re-arrange *sattriya* material and introduce instruments not usually found in the *sattr*. However, I had still imagined that the performance basis would be closer to what I had seen in the *namghar* than what the *bhakats* performed on the tour. This had led me to choose venues that I felt would accommodate a performance that fits a long thin space, and faces towards the narrow end of an oblong like in the *namghar* (as per Figure 5). This had also led to my surprise on learning that two members of the troupe were not from UKS. As demonstrated in this chapter, in order to prepare *sattriya* arts for a tour, Bhabananda made a number of interventions which would make the value of the dance recognisable to the ‘receiver’ of the performance he offered. Many of these interventions were intended to give the work value to an imagined ‘western audience’. Erdman’s characterisation of the ‘western audiences’ navigated by Uday Shankar reflects many of the considerations Bhabananda has addressed in *Vrindavani Paal*:

The impatience of western audiences relative to audiences in India, their need for continuous entertainment in segments, their theatrical conventions and limited

knowledge of the language of Indian music in performance, and their critical importance in touring success meant that without translations in time, tempo, timing, and duration, the program would fail. (Erdman 1987: 83).

Bhabananda, with only one hour in which to display the value and beauty of *sattriya* arts was keen to create a ‘variety style’ performance, elegantly drawing in as many elements as possible. The five-part performance, the placing of the *gayan bayan* and the horizontal proscenium-stage positioning demonstrate work prepared to appeal to such a generically understood ‘western audience’. More specifically for this tour, Bhabananda drew from *sattriya* practices to create sections which would complement the British Museum ‘Vrindavani Vastra’. There is no traditional dance about the textile, so Bhabananda uses the framework, dance, music and storytelling styles of *oja pāli* and a poem which describes all the *avatars* of Vishnu depicted in the British Museum example, to create a completely new dance performance. Similarly, though there is no ‘Bakasura Badha’ episode in *ankiya naat*, he composes a new song for the purpose, using a melody from the traditional repertoire.

What is perhaps less predictable in *Vrindavani Paal* are the alterations to *sattriya* arts materials which are not done to make the performance more digestible or appropriate for western audiences, but which are done to make it adhere more closely to the norms of an Indian Classical dance recital. A principal example of this would be the inclusion of the *vandana*, and the mimetic elements introduced therein. In her study on South Asian dance in the UK, Kedhar explains how, conversely, the choreographers and owners of dance company Ambika chose to focus on non-mimetic components of dance in order to remain accessible to British audiences who were not familiar with Indian mythology:

The focus on the abstract and the body allowed them the flexibility to explore themes in a non-literal, non-traditional way that made their work more accessible to white British audiences. Ambika’s productions did not require prior knowledge or understanding of South Asian dance. The lack of narrative, mythology, and facial expression aimed at non-South Asian audiences ensured their work garnered a broad base of support and had universal appeal. (Kedhar 2011: 66).

Unlike the choreographers from Ambika, however, who work within a British national framework, Bhabananda travels as an ICCR-empannelled Sattriya exponent: not in his role as a *bhakat* (*bhakats*, as we saw in Chapter Four, do not travel), but as a classical artiste. A *sattriya jhumura* would be completely devoid of mimesis and therefore,

according to the logic of Ambika, have a more ‘universal appeal’. But Bhabananda actively *introduces* mimesis in order to create a more convincing classical recital, in keeping with the category under which he travels.

As well as showing how these considerations from the *sattrā*, the ‘sending’ nation and the ‘host nation’ of a toured dance become legible through a dance form, this chapter also highlights the creative presence of Bhabananda as choreographer. To an audience enjoying a performance of ‘classical’ dance by ‘traditional’ practitioners in the foyer of the British Museum, it might have seemed that what was being presented was, like the objects surrounding them, static and unchanging; relocated, but in complete continuity with the past. Such an understanding would only be confirmed by reading programme notes and most published work on Sattriya dance. The discussion in Chapters Four, Five and Six of the production context and the content of *Vrindavani Paal* refutes such narratives whilst asserting the capabilities of a monastic practitioner. Moreover, by looking at the work of one of very few *bhakat*-choreographers who is able to travel overseas, I have also paid testimony to a rare performance of many *sattriya* arts, such as *oja pali*, *bhaona* and various *mati akhara* positions, which have not made the final cut as ‘Sattriya dance’ overseas.

Chapter Six: Mobilising *sattriya* arts via ‘foreign bodies’

The loudest and most enthusiastic applause was, predictably, for Lucia, Kaushik Kashyap’s foreign student, she who had generated, in the last thirty hours, almost as much talk and speculation as had her Guru. The people of Tamulbari, even those who had little interest in any kind of music, were gratified that a foreign lady had actually set foot in their little city. Yes, a true blue Mem, with green eyes and reddish hair, just like, Angelina Jolie! [...] Of course foreign students were a badge of success these days and many classical musicians flaunted their students for the more one had the more they added to the artiste’s stature.

—Mitra Phukan, *A Monsoon of Music* (2011: 144)

Local value; foreign bodies

Shortly after the *bhakats* from UKS had returned from their first European tour in 2008, a young French woman named Rebecca arrived at the monastery with a large rucksack on her back. She had met the performers after a show in France, noted their address and then made her way to Majuli Island to enrol as Govinda’s first ever ‘foreign student’. In the years that followed, UKS has seen a small stream of learners coming to the *sattria* from overseas to learn the art form. Many have learned about or encountered the *bhakats* during their foreign tours which, as with the Manganiyar musicians of Rajasthan (see Ayyagari 2009), are important networking opportunities. In this chapter, I consider the value to Bhabananda Barbayan and other members of USS of mobilising dance through teaching—specifically to foreigners and short-term leisure learners. As I argued in Chapter One, most accounts of international exchanges of dance are discussed from the perspective of the leisure learner. Thus, dances are described as ‘exotic’ (for example in Shay 2008) and the teachers are the ‘other’, rather than the learners, who are closer to the ethnographic ‘self’. This is a common trait of what Graeber considers ‘economistic’ notions of exchange which emphasise the consumer in considerations of value, rather than the producer.

In this chapter, I consider the value of mobilising *sattriya* arts through teaching foreign students. In my discussion, I look at the ways in which audiences’ values are anticipated as *bhakats* re-arrange their performance practices for consumption by short-term learners. I also emphasise what such mobilisation does for the *bhakats* themselves,

rather than the question of what desires and pleasures are satisfied by the learners (a subject which has received ample attention elsewhere, for example Kraus 2017; Moe 2012; Seller-Young 2013 etc.). Matthew Isaac Cohen's *Performing Otherness: Java and Bali on International Stages, 1905-1952* (2010), which considers western artists who learned and performed Indonesian artforms and instruments as Indonesia emerged as a nation state, also provides a useful context for considering the politics and meanings of westerners performing a 'foreign' dance form, but again, with more of a focus on the experiences of the western performer ('Otherness' of the title, referring to the Javanese and Balinese cultures). In considering the perspective of the performers, I thus discover the value of international teaching as a strategy of empowerment by a community generally excluded from middle class institutions and representations (as seen in Chapter Three). 'Giving' dance to students from overseas allows *bhakats* to build social connections (See Graeber:45), thus resisting their under-representation abroad. The mobilisation of *sattriya* arts on 'foreign bodies' also helps to make these dances valuable to Assamese audiences. This draws local interest to the dance forms, including via television media generally dominated by India's elites.

The value of 'The West'

In her 2011 novel *Monsoon of Music*, quoted above, Mitra Phukan satirises the practice of music teachers prizing their foreign students and giving them more prominence, often to the disadvantage of their local students. Taking on foreign students and affording them visibility does, however problematically, present an opportunity for Indian artists hoping to raise the status of their art in the eyes of local audiences. In her study of the Beravā, a community of performers who developed the performance practices now known as Sri Lanka's national 'Kandyan Dance', Susan Reed describes mobilisation of dances from the bodies of 'skilled' but 'socially marginal' performers, to those of 'elite and middle class dancers':

The specific embodiments of particular performance forms may dramatically affect their reception. Elite and middle-class dancers, even if performing in a mediocre fashion, may do more to enhance the status of an art form than even the most skilled performance by a socially marginal performer. (Reed 2002: 253)

Because it is the class and status of the dancer which is being valued by those who bestow status, as opposed to their skill, Reed argues, the ‘embodiment’ of Berava dance by elite and middle class dancers leads to its upward social mobilisation. Similarly, as I show below, Bhabananda has identified that ‘the West’ carries an allure for young Indians. Demonstrating that westerners are interested in and will learn *sattriya* dance is a way in which he can shed the ‘conservative-traditionalist’ stereotype conferred in dominant narratives whilst enhancing local pride in *sattria* arts. Thus, the ‘embodiment’ by foreigners enhances the dance’s value in the eyes of Bhabananda’s imagined local audience. Though I understand the broader problematics of power, race and class that this strategy relies on, I am interested in the ways in which the *bhakats* knowingly engage the value of ‘whiteness’ in order to circumvent other sorts of power. Teaching short-term foreign learners poses less of a threat to *sattria* ownership of artistic practices than national elites because they are less likely to have the resources or impetus to appropriate the dance form or take it into new institutions. Moreover, foreign students catch the attention of the Indian press and public and thereby present an opportunity for *bhakats* to access channels of representation dominated by middle-class urban *Sattriya* practitioners. By teaching a small number of foreigners a sample of their art during short-term engagements and one-off workshops, rather than long-term local students, *bhakats* are able to ‘enhance the status’ of *sattriya* arts without losing possession of them.

So far this thesis has considered the processes of translating Assamese Vaishnavite performance practices into national and international idioms—where monastic bodies, trained since early childhood to follow particular patterns, move in new ways in order to engage with classicising and globalising norms. Here I observe these same practitioners teaching foreigners to dance ‘like themselves’. The training of ‘western’ bodies in *sattriya* idioms has helped monastic performers to create international links and build audiences within India, by strategically engaging with the cultural capital of foreign learners.

I approach the subject through a discussion of three different environments in which *bhakats* from UKS have taught *sattriya* to foreigners. Firstly, I focus on practices within the *sattria* which cater to tourists and scholars like myself. Secondly, I return to the tour which brought *Vrindavani Paal* to the UK in the summer of 2016, focusing on the workshops we organised in performance venues, schools and at the Newcastle Hindu

Temple. Thirdly, I discuss an English-language production of *Keli-gopala*, Sankaradeva's Brajawali and Sanskrit play based on a tale in the Bhagavad Purana, directed by Bhabananda Barbayan in Guwahati in January 2018, which starred only 'international'—i.e. non-Indian—actors. For each case study, I consider how the act of teaching 'foreigners' *sattriya* arts presents an opportunity for the *bhakats* to go beyond nationalist narratives and mobilise self-representations of their own making. In my discussion of the international *bhaona* performance, I also consider the tensions involved when the foreign performers were invited to engage in performance practices which ran into conflict with their own notions of race and gender acceptability. With a sharp focus on the values of local audiences, Bhabananda and his production team ran into conflict with the values of the international actors they were working with.

Embodied Tourism

Scholarship concerning short-term leisure learning of dances from 'other' cultures focuses on a 'World Dance' scene: the workshops and competitions which mostly take place in metropolitan centres in the country of origin or affluent countries abroad and involve globalised forms such as Bollywood, Samba, Salsa, Ballroom and Zouk, to name, for example, those offered by Pineapple Dance Studios in London and listed on their website under the title 'World' (see Skinner 2007 for a discussion of Salsa and an extensive bibliography on its scholarship). The collection of essays in Susan Leigh Foster's *Worlding Dance* (2009) also provides a recent and thorough examination of the internationalisation of dance. Anne Decoret-Ahiha discusses the emergence of a World Dance consumer group in France in the first half of the twentieth century (Decoret-Ahiha 2004). Skinner gives a concise description of a world dance industry and its consumers in relation to Salsa:

Salsa has become a cultural product, one navigated by cosmopolitan artists and musicians, one relying on an international market economy and the existential needs of the public with time on their hands [...], a disposable income in their pockets, and seeking activities in which to come together, express their emotions, fulfil their fantasies and proto-narratives [...] and to affirm self-identity in our late-modern world (Skinner 2007: 488).

There has been far less work on the short-term, leisure-learning of less 'mobile' dance forms—the ones that do not travel internationally—which are likely to be consumed on

foreign tours, or in touristic encounters. An important exception to this is the collection of essays on dance tourism edited by Kringelbach and Skinner (2014), which describe the motivations for and effects of cross-cultural encounters between foreign tourists and dance forms which have not emerged within a World Music market. In her contribution to this collection, Hughes-Freeland discusses ‘embodied’ dance tourism—encounters which involve learners trying out an ‘exotic’ dance form on their own bodies. She approaches the topic with a broad lens, considering short- to long-term encounters with Javanese dance along a ‘continuum’ of dance exchange, with dance ‘tourists’ at one end and longer-term students, learning and performing both within and beyond Java (for example, the Hawaii Dance Academy) at the other. My analysis borrows from Hughes-Freeland’s work considering tourists, scholars and dancers of *sattriya* dance as participating in a single continuum of ‘embodied tourism’.

There are growing opportunities for ‘westerners’ to sample South Asian performance practices—as leisure learners, scholars or dance students— particularly in countries with large South Asian diasporas such as the UK, Canada and the US.¹ In the UK, Dance Days (www.dancedays.co.uk) and Primary Workshops for Schools and are two of many organisations which offer ‘Indian dance’ and ‘Indian drumming’ workshops in schools (www.primaryworkshopsforschools.com); and The Bollywood Company (www.thebollywoodco.com) and Bollywood Vibes (www.bollywoodvibes.co.uk) offer workshops at corporate events, hen parties, birthday celebrations, and other occasions. At Womad Festival of Music and Dance, attendees can try out South Asian dance forms and instruments in their programme of over 200 workshops sampling ‘anything from African drumming to acapella singing, from Beatboxing to Brazilian dance’ (www.womad.co.uk). At SOAS University of London, during the annual World Music Summer School (which I currently run) participants can try out the *tabla* or study a Hindustani Classical *raga* over a week of evening classes conducted by a professional musician. South Asian performing arts have a rich professional life beyond performance and long-term pedagogy which remains an important area for further research.

¹ This has coincided with the rise of an international yoga industry. The processes and debates surrounding cultural appropriation and intellectual property in relation to yoga are a useful point of comparison with Indian dance workshop industry. See, for example Karumanchi 2011; Atglas 2014; Kelly 2016.

Anusha Kedhar's ethnographic research into contemporary British Asian dance companies (2011; 2014) provides an important insight into the work of touring South Asian performers. She discusses short-term dance 'intensives'—for professional dancers of various South Asian dance forms—organised at the Bhavan Centre in London which provide teaching opportunities to Indian dance teachers—as well as the workshops organised by South Asian dance company 'Ambika' in British schools. These workshops act both as 'curtain raisers' which help increase audience numbers of Ambika's shows, as well as to 'mitigate public fears' about 'brown bodies':

Through an emphasis on innovation, rural touring, education workshops, choreographic residencies, and post show discussions with local audiences and rural dance communities, South Asian dancers, such as Subramaniam and Boonham, have made British Asian culture accessible to less diverse and more racially polarized parts of the UK. Their work on and off stage smoothes [sic] out the friction between Britishness and South Asianness, and mitigates public fears about the growing presence of brown bodies in the UK (Kedhar 2011: 64-65).

Kedhar's work thus draws attention to the politics of the encounter between a South Asian art form and a British audience: Ambika's intercultural workshops navigate and seek to reconcile a difficult history.

Sattriya Dance and non-Vaishnavites

Before examining the transmission of 'monastic dance' to 'non-monks', it should be remembered here that aspects of the danced traditions which are being taught in the workshops described below and currently codified as 'Sattriya' dance have long been practised beyond the Assamese Vaishnava tradition. As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, much of the vocabulary now understood to be 'from the *sattrā*' is shared with, or has been absorbed from, non-Vaishnavite traditions. Even before the syncretising/sanskritising processes of classicisation, Assamese Vaishnavite performers shared sounds and movements with Buddhist *carya*, Saivite *nāti*, and *oja pāli* storytellers from various Hindu sects. More recently, the classicised form performed and taught beyond the monastery gates has adopted *abhinaya* techniques akin to Bharatanatyam, Odissi and other national Indian dance forms, and instrumentation and *raga* from northern Indian Classical styles. Non-Vaishnava bodies have, therefore, long been performing the practices now understood as 'from the *sattrā*', whether or not conceived as such,

evidenced by the ‘non-Vaishnava’ elements which have been absorbed into *sattrā* practices.

Though, as discussed in Chapter Three, recent representations of the history of Sattriya dance cast ‘traditional’ performers as reluctant to collaborate with those beyond the *sattrā*, I found absolutely no evidence of a conservative element at UKS who would prefer to keep the dance form within the monastery. In any case, the revival of Neo-Vaishnavism as a democratic and anti-caste religion (see Chapter Two) has made it harder for a conservative narrative to be voiced openly. Most *bhakats* were keen to represent themselves and their forefathers—to me at least—as open to teaching anyone. During one of my dance classes, Govinda received a phone call from some senior students who taught Sattriya in his dance school in Guwahati, asking for advice about how to deal with an admission request from a Muslim. Govinda told me, in English once he’d ended the call: ‘I told him “Of course! Everyone can learn.” Sankaradeva believed everyone should be able to know Krishna!’²

The phone call reminded me that there *are* questions about teaching ‘outsiders’, however configured; but the response confirms that Govinda would prefer to communicate a democratic, people-championing rhetoric. Given the *bhakats*’ norms of politeness, it is possible that the narrative they put forward to me was shaped by my own position as a female, foreign (Christian) scholar interested in learning to dance. Similarly, those who have dominated the representation of *sattrā* performance practices—Sunil Kothari, Maheswar Neog, Indira P P Bora and so on—are non-monks, who evidently bring and elicit a pro-outsider bias to their writing and work. There are, however, strong pragmatic and financial motivations for monastic dance exponents to advocate teaching beyond the *sattrā*. More than pandering to the powerful, espousing a cosmopolitan attitude towards teaching Sattrā in fact helps the monks to take on the tools of power. In the following case studies, it is possible to see how teaching foreigners to dance helps monks to retain control and influence over a dance form which has been recently dominated by elite outsiders and non-monks.

Case Study 1: In the *sattrā*

² Fieldnote diary entry after dance lesson on 19th August

Independent travellers and small tour groups who are introduced to UKS via guide books or local tour companies (such as Jungle Travels, Assam-Bengal Navigation and Earthlink Tours and Travels) tend to engage with *sattriya* arts as spectators rather than active participants. During my stay at the monastery in August/ September 2016, I observed a small number of tourists. They are welcomed by Govinda, or another of the more hospitable members of the monastery and are generally taken on a tour of the monastery grounds, given tea in one of the *boha* and invited to the *namghar* to watch a performance. As I was present during the month of *bhadra*, in which the monks rehearse and perform regularly to celebrate the death anniversaries of their founders Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Padma Bordula Ata, I saw tourists witnessing both ‘staged’ (put on specifically for them) and ‘ritual’ (occurring as part of the *sattri*’s ritual timetable) performances. Visitors are not generally aware of the difference. *Bhakats* keep this ambiguous, either because they are not keen to admit to the commercialisation of dance within the *namghar* space, or out of a desire to cater to a perceived desire for authenticity. It became clear to me which was which only when I became aware of the *sattri*’s timetable, and also when I observed (from 2013 onwards) that during staged performances, someone would place a *xorai*, a traditional offering tray on a stand, in the centre of the *namghar* at the end of a performance. I for one (in my role as a tour leader) was advised to place at least 2000 rupees on it. A *bhakat* told me that on some occasions tour leaders had not paid any money to the monks for performing, despite the fact that they take money from the tourists who watch the performances. This could be simple exploitation, but it also might be in part due to a (convenient) confusion about whether *bhakats*, commonly represented as ‘unworldly’ and dancing purely out of devotion, expect payment at all. The presentation of a *xorai* at the end of performances, clears up this ambiguity and indicates (to me) when a performance is specially staged for tourists. During these sorts of tourist interactions, with only one exception, the tourists did not dance; their engagement with the performance practices was strictly ‘ocular, rather than embodied.’ (Hughes-Freeland 2014: 116). As discussed in Chapter Two, I was responsible for bringing groups of non-Indian tourists to Majuli Island, under the auspices of my travel company, Sound Travels. Until I conducted fieldwork in 2015, I never encouraged participation in the dance, because as I explain in Chapter Three, I was unsure whether it was appropriate until I had been encouraged to learn myself and heard a lot about other tourist-dancers. Since then I have only conducted one tour, in 2015, in which my guests gladly learned a few *sattriya* movements and *hastas*.

Tourists who have been introduced to the existence of UKS through the monks' European dance tours since 2008 are much more likely to visit Majuli island in order to learn to dance, as became evident when I read through the inscriptions in Govinda's visitors book. In December 2011/January 2012 a group of women from Belgium and France spent a few weeks learning with Govinda. Their thank you notes in the visitors' books demonstrate that they had previously met Govinda in Paris, spent a week or longer at the sattrā and had learned to dance:

30.12.10

Happy to see you after your performance in June in Paris

I'm glad to spend the next days here with you all and celebrate into the year 2011.

[later added:]

Thank you for 3 wonderful peaceful warm and openhearted weeks here with you.

Glad to still see you on stage the 18/19/20 January

I'll keep you in my heart!

January 2011

I am very happy to have learnt some dancing with you. Thank you very much for your kindness and your patience also! I hope to come back one day or see you somewhere in France

29.01.11

Merci pour l'apprentissage de cette Danse merveilleuse "tiqui tiqui ta" J'ai compris que la dance n'est pas si simple qu'elle me le paraît

Merci Govinda pour ta patience. J'ai passé un merveilleux moment un peu court mais ce peu [illegible] beaucoup approuve.

[Thank you for teaching this wonderful 'tiqui tiqui ta' dance. I have learnt that the dance is not as simple as it seemed. Thank you Govinda for your patience. I had a great time; a bit short but greatly approved of.]

Govinda also frequently spoke about Rebecca, mentioned above, who travelled to Majuli in November 2008 during the *Ras Lila* celebrations and returned at the same

time for three years, during which time she learned three dance sequences from the classical repertoire.

Some foreign visitors developed friendships and working relationships over repeated visits to UKS. Whilst such visitors, considering themselves as colleagues, friends, researchers or dance students may recoil from the moniker ‘tourist’, our experiences have much in common with those of shorter-term tourists, and benefit from shared analysis. Like Hughes-Freeland, my interest lies with ‘cultures on the move and cultural encounters on a continuum from the conventional understanding of tourism as short-term visits to longer engagements, such as field research’ (2014: 101). The relationship between the subject position of the tourist and visiting researcher has been well-documented. According to Hughes-Freeland:

Early in the anthropology of tourism, Malcolm Crick suggested that anthropologists themselves are a species of tourist (Crick 1985). During my own research on tourism in Yogyakarta in 1989, I was disconcerted to discover that foreign residents are classed as tourists (*pariwisata*), or specifically as overseas tourists (*wisman*) (in contrast to local tourist, *wisnu*). Despite Crick’s comparison, I felt unhappy to be classed along with holidaymakers spending a few days in the city before going on to Bali. Whether I liked it or not, being a participant-observer did not free me from the stigma of tourism in the eyes of the locals. (Hughes-Freeland 2014: 103).

Like tourists, scholars travel from richer, more powerful parts of the world, to poorer, less powerful places and we take similar routes. In Chapter Two, I describe how UKS’s close relationship to national elites has made it likely that both tourists and researchers interested in Assamese Vaishnavism will end up there, rather than other *sattras*.

Though my dance lessons with Govinda would prove invaluable to my research, it was him, not me, who first suggested I undertook them. Before I arrived on Majuli Island I was very unsure whether it would be appropriate to suggest it, for reasons I discussed in Chapter Three. I had learned *borgeet* songs with a private music teacher in Golaghat, Assam, in 2013, and had enjoyed singing them with Govinda on various occasions since, so I felt comfortable to suggest *borgeet* lessons. ‘Yes.’ Govinda had answered, ‘and I will teach you to dance too.’ I wanted to understand the language of the performance practices I was planning to write about, so this suited me. I did not ask what *sort* of dance I wanted to be taught, because I had not yet realised there were different versions, and I lacked the vocabulary to specify, so I had to be led by Govinda.

As I am female, foreign, not a monk and only learning for a short duration, I fitted into a category of learner somewhere between tourist and urban female dance student, which allowed me some insight into ways that these sorts of students are taught. I was therefore not taught the *gayan bayan*, *oja pāli*, challenging *mati akhara* positions, nor taught a forty-minute pure dance: I was taught a short dance envisioned as performance, which followed a different grammar to the devotional dances on which it was based (see Chapter Three). Govinda used positional terms like ‘off-stage’ and ‘on-stage’ as well as ‘facing the audience’ and he would mention future performance possibilities and asked me when I wanted to order my costume. Influenced by these assumptions and hopes of Govinda, I also started to think of my training as preparation for performance, though I have not performed the *cali nach* in public since leaving Majuli Island at the end of my fieldwork. Teaching me as a performer, rather than a researcher, Govinda did not explain the structure or ‘ingredients’ of what I was learning. It was only once I had read Neog and Changkakoti’s 1962 transcription of *cali nach* number eight and could identify components of the dance I had learned that I became able to ask Govinda the right questions about what exactly it was that I was dancing.

Over the course of these and other teaching experiences, Govinda developed methods of teaching short-term foreign learners which were different to those used with sattrā inmates. A most obvious example was the use of counting. Monastic students as well as non-monastic Indian students of sattrā dances, hear and are required to chant sections of mnemonic syllables (known as *bol*) which correspond to a particular *khol* phrase as they learn a dance. Thus ‘**thay** dina, **khita** dhina, **tate** tata kiti **ta** dina dina, **tate** tata kiti **ta** dina dina, **thay**’ is spoken while the teacher demonstrates a twelve-beat section (the twelve accented beats are marked in bold, the second *thay* is the first beat of the next cycle). Each syllable corresponds to a different way of striking the *khol*. Govinda usually taught me in this way and put a lot of emphasis on the need to remember *bol* sections before starting to dance. In contrast to his attitude with his monastic students, however, he encouraged me to write these down (he popped out of my dance lesson to buy a pen and notepad from the monastery shop, for this purpose). Also, where I was looking lost or putting the emphasis on the wrong beat, he would revert to counting in fours: one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four, *one*. He would occasionally count beats or steps in French, which further revealed it as a technique developed to teach foreigners. During the *bhaona* workshops that

Bhabananda conducted with foreign students, described below, the students learned without bol, and through counting only, so this may have become Bhabananda's default technique for short-term learners, particularly those without any previous training in Indian dance.

The second area in which Govinda tailored his teaching methods to fit the needs of short-term foreign learners was in understanding the amount of material that could be taught in a short timeframe. Govinda told me that although he had intended to teach the 2010 group from France a whole dance, after their second lesson, they asked him to slow down, so he taught them a few *mati akhara* sequences instead. In 2016, when I started dance lessons with Govinda, he assessed that he would be able to teach me a 15-minute dance choreography during my six-weeks stay. Three days before I was due to leave, I was ready for my 'final performance' with *khol* and flute accompaniment.

As well as the small fee attached to my dance lessons, I also discovered other ways in which foreign learners are able, even encouraged, to reciprocate. The first was by giving interviews and appearing on local television. Towards the end of my stay at UKS, a TV crew from Assamese-language news channel *DY365* came to the auditorium to film my dance lesson. They also recorded me singing a *borgeet* I had learned (called *Kohore Udabo*), an interview, in which I said how much I loved being in Assam and learning in UKS, and an interview with Govinda, in which he spoke about my connection with King's College London, how long I was there for and what he had taught me. The next day, this footage was aired repeatedly on successive news bulletins and for several weeks afterwards, in different parts of Assam, people who saw me asked if I was the same foreigner they had seen on TV. The day after the story aired on *DY365*, two other news channels called Govinda to request interviews, which I duly gave.



Figure 15: DY365 news coverage of my dance lessons at UKS



Figure 16: Interview with Govinda Kalita about my dance lessons

To the local news channel, the arrival of a foreign learner at the *sattrā* was still rare enough to be considered newsworthy. As can be seen in Figure 16, this gave Govinda access to the microphone. Thus, he was simultaneously able to refute revivalist narratives that cast *bhakats* as inward-looking and closed to outside collaboration, and to speak, rather than having middle class elites step in to speak for him.

The second act of reciprocity by foreign learners, which, like TV appearances helps *bhakats* to communicate an identity of their own construction, is in promoting *sattriya* dance in their countries of origin. Mattis and Nicos Dalton, Mahina Khanum, Maïté Jeannolin and Bezabel Falfan have studied at length with Bhabananda Barbayan over a number of years. Mattis and Nicos have helped to facilitate international *bhaona* projects over consecutive years and Maïté Jeannolin helped in the 2008 tour. French dancer Mahina Kanum gained an ICCR scholarship to learn Odissi for two years under Madhavi Mudgal in Delhi, before learning Sattriya with Bhabananda in 2017. She then organised workshops and performances in France later that same year which enabled Bhabananda to apply for Air India to sponsor his tickets to France (which allowed me to meet him for the Paris interviews, as mentioned in Chapter Five). USA-based Assamese Madhusmita Bora who runs a Sattriya dance company in Philadelphia, USA, visits UKS on short annual or biannual visits, to learn with Govinda Kalita. She organised the 2018 Philadelphia tour mentioned in Chapter Four. As discussed in Chapter Four, I also facilitated an overseas tour after my dance lessons. Most of Govinda and Bhabananda's long-term international associates that I know have helped to facilitate international tours for performers from UKS.

Through this discussion of dance teaching based at UKS, I have demonstrated three important points. Firstly, it was evident that, though it is still fairly rare to find international dance students in UKS, by the time of my lessons in 2015, there was already a precedent for training outsiders. This was demonstrated through Govinda's stories of previous learners, his occasional lapses into counting in French, the fact that the lessons were initiated by Govinda, rather than me, and that he had developed a clear system for content, timing, duration and price of the classes. Secondly, I have demonstrated that teaching a foreigner was something to be publicised: both Govinda and the DY365 news company felt that there was value in publicising my *sattriya* lessons. Thirdly, I learned, and latterly demonstrated through my own actions, that dance students from overseas frequently ended up promoting *sattriya* arts in their own countries.

Case Study 2: Sattriya workshops in the UK

As mentioned in Chapter Four, members of the troupe who toured the UK in July 2016 conducted dance workshops with UK participants. Though participants were on ‘home’ territory, these interactions had much in common with Hughes-Freeland’s notion of ‘the conventional understanding of tourism as short-term visits,’ (101) in that the participants had very little knowledge of what they were engaging with, and—apart from a small minority—had no intention to follow up with future lessons. In this section, I describe how participants responded to the workshops that formed part of the 2016 UK tour and how the *bhakat*-teachers publicised them on social media, in ways which helped create an online presence for themselves of their own making.

These eight workshops varied in length, and the type of participants, but each followed the same simple format: I would give a brief sketch of the beliefs and lifestyles of the ‘monks from Assam’ and describe Assam’s geographical location in India and UKS’s position within that. In the first four workshops I invited participants to introduce themselves and explain their interest in joining the workshop, but this was not appropriate in the schools, and would have taken too long in the Newcastle Temple, which attracted more than sixty participants. Next, Bhabananda would invite everyone to sit in a circle and place both hands on the floor with their eyes closed, to ‘honour the earth’. He would then teach the *purusha ora* position (see Figure 5 in Chapter Five), followed by a short routine involving movements of the hands, arms, legs and head. He would also encourage the group to say the *bol* sequence ‘*ta dina dheni da. Tata kita kitidaki dha*’ as they moved. Having explained a short sequence to the whole group, Bhabananda would face each participant in turn and chant the *bol* sequence until they were able to dance to his satisfaction. By the end of one hour, when the whole group had grasped the full sequence, Govinda would start to accompany them on the *khol*. Finally, Bhabananda would invite the group to sit, and he would demonstrate around twenty *hastas* or hand gestures, naming each one in turn. The group copied each word and gesture in unison. After the participatory learning was finished, Bhabananda would perform a short demonstration accompanied by one or two monks playing percussion. The group would applaud, ask a few questions and then slowly disperse.

The first of these workshops, held in the British Museum, was free and involved twenty conference participants, British Museum staff and members of the public who had discovered the workshop via Eventbrite. The workshop was followed by a drinks reception. The two workshops at Somerset House, both free, were advertised via Utopia

festival publicity, Eventbrite and on Facebook and drew about twelve participants each, 80% female. A French woman who had trained with Bhabananda in Paris and promoted the monks' 2008 tour in France attended two of these sessions, and two more participants mentioned former training other Indian dance forms, but the rest were entirely new to Sattriya dance. In Bury Court, the twenty-two participants paid £10 each to participate in the two-hour workshop. When participants from London and Bury Court introduced themselves to the rest of the group and responded on camera to questions from the tour film crew, it became clear that they had either visited India at least once were considered themselves 'Indophiles' or both.

In Newcastle and Gateshead, the workshops organised by GemArts involved participants with very different relationships with India. The first three workshops were held at Whickham School and Kingsmeadow School, state secondary schools in Newcastle and Gateshead respectively, and involved pupils aged 11-13. At Whickham, we held two dance workshops in a sports hall, during the students' compulsory PE (Physical Education) class (see Figure 17). At Kingsmeadow, the pupils had opted to participate as an alternative to their timetabled lessons. The dance workshops had been arranged at rather short notice, and the teachers were apologetic that they had had little chance to prepare the students or tie the workshops into class content. None of the pupils had ever been to India, and only one pupil—also the only participant of South Asian descent—raised her hand when I asked if anyone had heard of Indian dance. No one had heard of Assam. They behaved respectfully towards me and the monks, participated seriously in learning the steps, and asked polite questions at the end of the session.



Figure 17: Bhabananda Barbayan conducting a workshop at Whickham School, Newcastle, 15th July 2016

The workshop in the Newcastle Hindu Temple meeting hall, co-organised by community volunteers, GemArts, under the direction of Vikas Kumar and our touring troupe attracted around seventy participants with a deep investment in Hinduism and Indian culture. The Hindu Temple volunteers organise regular meetings with a ‘physical’ and ‘learning’ component, so Vikas Kumar’s proposal to hold a Sattriya workshop was taken up with enthusiasm. At the start of the session, adults and children who seemed to attend these meetings regularly took part in a militaristic drill, where commands were called out by a young volunteer and the rest of the party followed. At the end of this, the young man raised a flag. Next, our troupe was invited to participate in a game in which a senior volunteer would call out either ‘Ram!’ or ‘Krishna!’ which signified whether the rest of the party had to run clockwise or anticlockwise. The *bhakats* of UKS and the rest of our tour troupe took part in this game and the laughter and breathlessness was, as intended, an excellent ‘ice-breaker’. Initially, the plan was that around 30 children aged between 5-12 years would participate in a dance workshop led by Bhabananda but in the event, all seventy that were present joined in the lesson. At the end of the workshop, the monks performed the *bhortal* and *gayan bayan* dances which made up the finale of the touring show (‘Vrindavani Paal), while everyone else

watched, sitting on the floor. Instead of clapping, everyone said ‘Om’ together – which was also a way that the community leaders would call the room to be quiet if it became too raucous, or they had an announcement to make. After the performance, our group was taken upstairs to see the temple, and then to the adjacent canteen where we were fed generously and given enough packed food to feed our whole team the following day.

In Chapter Four, I explained how workshops were useful tools in gaining ACE funding which enabled Bhabananda, Govinda and the rest of the troupe to tour, and thereby facilitate the representation of Satriya abroad by *bhakats*, rather than by the middle-class elites who dominate the genre overseas. In addition to this overseas presence, the *bhakats* are also able to raise the value of their work ‘at home’ by sharing images of the workshops on social media which elicit pride amongst Assamese audiences. After the tour Bhabananda posted images of workshops and performances in a Facebook photo album entitled ‘From the Great Hall, British Museum, London,’ which was greeted by 270 ‘likes’ and congratulatory comments from Assamese friends and fans:

Proud moment for us

Proud moment for Assam

Proud moments for us, the Assam Association, Delhi too. Barbayan is Adhyapak of Assam Association Satriya Academy.

Congratulations sir really a proud moment for all of us

Carry on your exemplary work Bhabananda Barbayan..u have made us proud !

Very very proud moment for the people of Assam Bhabananda Barbayan. I am really happy the way our beautiful Xatriya heritage is being presented in the UK and France. I wish you my very best for all your future endeavours

I am proud of my culture.....n I am even more proud of those people who r spreading our culture across the world.....proud of u

bhakha nai aapunaak proxonkha koriboloi.....aapunar sinskir vitorot moyu aaasu buli moi gorvbato...aapunaar xopun aaru kosto xarthok houk....bhogobanor usorot mur eiye prathona....

[I have no words to praise you. I am proud to be part of the same culture as you. May your dreams and your hard work bear fruit. This is my prayer to the almighty.]

Sundar kam hoise, amr gaurab Satriya Nittra k aru uporoloi niajok.

[Great work. Take our pride—Sattriya dance—even further].

In the comments on Bhabananda's Facebook album, the English word 'proud' and its Assamese equivalent *gorvbito/ gaurab* are used twenty-one times by Assamese commentators. In such expressions, Bhabananda's online followers communicate ownership of the work these performers have carried out in the UK. Because the dance forms being taught and performed are understood as the property of the Assamese nation, even non-practitioners can express 'pride' at the propagation of 'our culture'. In Bury Court, one participant asked Bhabananda and Govinda how she might continue to learn Sattriya dance in the UK. They responded by inviting her to come to Majuli to learn. When I asked Govinda about his feelings about the Bury Court workshop, his only response was mentioning this connection. To him, the participant's expression of interest signified to him that the workshop had been a success: people had liked it enough to want to continue to learn, and a new international connection had been made.

Case Study 3: International *Bhaona* performances

Bhabananda understood how much Assamese audiences enjoy seeing 'their' culture performed by foreigners. Between 2016-2018 he produced and directed three performances of plays by Sankaradeva—*bhaona*—which starred 'international' amateur actors and dancers. In 2016 he produced *Parijat Haran* in French; in 2017 *Ram-Vijay* in Spanish; and in 2018, *Keli Gopal* in English. These productions were supported by the Assamese state government and three performances of each play were held at the Kalakshetra, Guwahati's main cultural centre and auditorium, also funded by the state government. Dialogues of these plays, originally written by Sankaradeva in Brajawali and Sanskrit, had been translated into English by Dayananda Pathak and then, in the case of the first two, re-translated from the English into French and Spanish. Songs, *slokas* and narrative sections remained in the original languages.

I had been invited to Guwahati to participate in conference organised by the Kalakshetra Society from 19th – 21st January 2018, which was timed to coincide with the productions of *Keli Gopal*. I shared accommodation with the group of young adults from Norway, the USA, Chile, Hong Kong, France and Denmark who had travelled to Assam for eighteen days of intense theatre and dance training with Bhabananda and

other *bhakats* from UKS in preparation for the show. Three of the group members who had known Bhabananda for some years had some prior training in dance or theatre, but the remaining seven were students of biology, English literature, physics and Sanskrit. By spending time with these actors and the *bhakats*, watching the performance on three consecutive nights and interviewing Bhabananda about the project, I gained an insight into the process of and motivations behind teaching ‘foreigners’ *sattriya* arts, as well as into some points of resistance that arose along the way.

Whereas the UK tour workshops were off-shoots of another project and produced along the lines of ACE requirements rather than any specific desire of the touring artists, the *bhaona* performances were driven by Bhabananda Barbayan’s artistic, devotional and political zeal. In an interview, I asked Bhabananda to explain his motivation for organising his annual ‘International Bhaona’ performances and commissioning French, Spanish and English translations for the purpose. In his response, he articulated two motivations – the first, to make the philosophies of Sankaradeva accessible beyond the Assamese community:

We cannot say that we want to propagate our culture, but I would like to say it’s our duty to propagate the philosophy of Sankardeb. His philosophy is very beneficial not only for Assam community but for others: it is a universal thing. So, because of that I wanted to give the message of him inside the artform. Theatre is a very strong medium... through theatre and dance we can distribute the feelings and people can understand easily. So, because of that I thought that if we do in our language then people who come to act in this, they don’t understand and if they say in their own language, they will feel something.

In the second part of his response, he explained how his international *bhaona* performances, by using western actors can inspire young Indians to access ‘their own culture’:

So why we do in Assam? This is another point. Nowadays in India, the new generation are not very interested about their own culture. They want to go the modern way: they are always attracted by western culture—what they think is western: this is not western, but they think it is. So, because of that, if western people bring our culture very deeply, they can motivate them, they can inspire. So, because of that I wanted that—to make the bridge.

Here Bhabananda has identified that the phenomenon Australian literary critic A. A. Phillips termed ‘Cultural Cringe’ in his essay of the same name (Phillips 2010). By

strategically engaging with foreign students, Bhabananda is addressing an Indian inferiority complex caused by years of Macaulayite disparagement of Indian cultures, coupled with the contemporary hegemony of the West.

From newspaper coverage of the event, and conversations I held with audience members, and Assamese friends and acquaintances I discussed the project with, I realised that Bhabananda's strategy was highly successful. 'I feel bad,' a doctor friend of mine told me over dinner in Guwahati after the show: 'All these foreigners coming to learn a play by Sankaradeva and I've never even seen one.'³ A newspaper article 'American touch to Sankaradeva's immortal *Keli Gopal*', echoed Bhabananda's sentiments with the line: 'Kalakshetra was happy to host a team of performers [...] of the prestigious Brown University, United States of America.'

The costume designer for the performance posted the following comments on her Facebook video clips of the performance:

Feeling proud... When people from all over the world adopt our culture and dance form... .. They appreciated, they learnt n they performedoverwhelming experience!! USA, Hongkong, France, Norway.. etc and happy to be a part of it.. — feeling loved.

...

We forgot our culture... But see how beautifully they danced though they come seven oceans across... M Vry blessed to be a part of it..

Encouraging foreigners to participate in an Assamese play fulfilled Bhabananda's aim to use international connections to raise local pride.

Mouldable bodies; establishing boundaries

When I asked Bhabananda why so many of the actors he taught had little or no experience of performing, he told me: 'I like to work with non-dancers because it's raw material. I can do what I want. It's a different pleasure to bring absolute beginners to the stage.' (Guwahati interview). Untutored dancers move like Bhabananda because most of them have no other reference point, unlike many of the local practitioners of Sattriya—including many of its most famous exponents—who are often schooled in

³ Conversation with Dr Tina Bordoloi, Fieldnote diary, 21st January 2018.

other classical forms as well, and whose Sattriya dance therefore is inflected with inflections of Kathak and Bharatanatyam. Moulding ‘foreign’ bodies to perform ‘in their own image’ was not, however, a completely straightforward task for the monastic director-teachers. By observing the rehearsal process and interviewing the actors, I discovered occasional moments of resistance which demonstrated that these ‘foreign bodies’ came with gender and race politics attached and were not always completely at ease with being moulded exactly as their directors wished. Though overcome through humour and negotiation, these frictions demonstrated where artists felt the need to establish boundaries, and the limits of translation of a dance form across borders.

The first difficult area was a question of skin colour. During the first two ‘international *bhaona*’ performances that Bhabananda had organised, all the foreign actors he had engaged were white. In the party from Brown University, three of the female actors were ‘of colour’, as the group put it: i.e. they had partly African American heritage. This was to have an impact on the way that Bhabananda cast them in the play. In the fifteenth *sloka* of *Keli Gopal*, the *sutradahr* (narrator) announces that the *gopis* will act out episodes from Krishna’s life story—the ‘Lila’ or divine acts:

Bhakta Promattyasta gopya mottayatmanong hi madhabam

Annonyamobhisambhasya biguja Krishna sestitam

[Out of desperation for Lord Krishna, the Gopis start describing the lilas (divine acts) – of the Lord to each other, now forgetful of their pains.] (Payak 2015: 148)

This is followed by *geet kanara porital*, a song which describes these episodes, which Bhabananda directed the actors playing the *gopis* to enact:

Lord Krishna killed demoness Putana

By biting the nipples of her breasts

The Lord has also killed demons like Agha and Boka.

The lord has also humbled the kali serpent

By dancing over the latter’s head,

And forced the serpent to leave the lake.

The Lord lifted the Mandar hill

On the tip of his finger to save the people

Of Gokul from the misdeeds of Indra.

Thereby, the Lord taught Indra a lesson.

Now, the same Lord joyfully dances with the Gopis

Embracing each other in ecstasy (D Pathak 2015: 148-9).

The song was sung in Assamese, and most of the actors had not seen the English translation, so they were not aware of what they were enacting. One actor told me she was simply told to spin around with a baby in her arms and then fall down on the ground ‘because the baby has bitten her breasts’⁴. She was not then aware that her movements depicted a scene that is highly familiar to any audience familiar with Hindu mythology, in which the demoness *Putana* tries to kill the baby Krishna by feeding him her poisonous breast milk but is herself vanquished by the powerful child-god. After some days of rehearsals, one of the participants in the ‘International Bhaona’ performance who had formerly trained in Odissi dance, and was therefore familiar with some Vaishnava stories, explained to her co-actors what they were doing. It was only then that the actors realised that all the demons depicted in this scene—Bakasura, Kaliya and Putana—were played by the three actors ‘of colour’, whilst the mimed characterisations of Krishna and *gopi* consorts had been played by a Korean and Norwegian actor respectively. In short, darker-skinned actors had been chosen to depict demons, and lighter-skinned actors for gods and their consorts. According to one member of the international party, the actors were not prepared to challenge this casting decision because, although it was ‘uncomfortable,’ it was ‘cultural’ rather than offensive. On the other hand, the black American actors did refuse the application of whitening lotion to make them appear lighter on stage, despite being told that this was regular practice and being shown that all the Indian actors and musicians on stage were doing the same. Whilst the costumes team tried to make the *gopis* appear as homogeneous as possible and dressed the female actors in identical costumes (in two different colour-ways), the actors resisted having their bodies coloured white for the purpose.

⁴ Interview with actor in *Keli-Gopala*: 19th January 2018.

Another site of resistance by workshop participants was in relation to gender. There are a number of problematic passages and episodes in *Keli Gopala* which do not stand up well to feminist analysis (Buchta 2018). As Buchta puts it:

If read simply as a worldly love story, Kṛṣṇa's behavior, glorified in the narrative, transgresses many of the societal norms of its own time and place, not to speak of contemporary ideals, in light of which Kṛṣṇa's behavior is evocative of the mistreatment of women under patriarchal social structures. A metaphorical, spiritual reading of the narrative that emphasizes devotion over carnal passion may help us to see profound value in this story, despite concerns about its framing (Buchta 2018).

For the most part, the students from Brown maintained their position of cultural relativism and did not articulate any criticisms of the gender politics of the play. Through their body language they depicted whimsical, delicate, passionate devotees of Krishna, projecting total surrender. Usually humour and irony was used to acknowledge, rather than openly confront situations which participants found uncomfortable. For example, in Pathak's translation, the male characters are listed individually: 'Sutradhar, Sri Krishna, Sankhasur' and the female characters are generalised: 'Gopis: Womenfolk of Braja' (D Pathak 129). When the international actors were introduced on stage, or to press, organisers and friends, the male actors and their characters were specified, whereas the female actors were introduced as a group: 'and these are the *gopis*'. On stage, when invited to introduce themselves individually, some of the actors playing *gopis* responded to this ironically: 'I am Mary from Providence: I'm *gopi* number eight'.

On another occasion, resistance was more forthright: a passage of the script was challenged and eventually changed to accommodate participants' concerns. In D Pathak's English translation, which was used for the Kalakshetra performances, the Gopis say: 'O Lord Krishna, we are women, always weak and imbecile in temperament. Don't find fault with us' (145-6).

For the first few rehearsals, the actor spoke the line as it was written, which caused some laughter backstage. After a while, one actor told Bhabananda she considered 'weak and imbecile' to be rather offensive. Had Sankaradeva really considered women in this way? On being told what 'imbecile' meant, Bhabananda felt that it was a mistranslation. He could not find a good English equivalent, but demonstrated by miming something like a butterfly settling on various surfaces. A few days before the

performance, Dr Buchta, a professor of Sanskrit at Brown University, joined the students in Guwahati. He showed them the original passage in Assamese:

হে স্বামী কৃষ্ণ স্বভাৱে চঞ্চল স্ত্রী (স্ত্রীক) দোষ ধৰবি নাই।

The key word ‘চঞ্চল’ [*sansal*] was not ‘imbecile’, he told us, but ‘fickle’. In the public performances which followed, the actress playing Radha said ‘fickle’.

By staging *bhaona* performances using international actors, Bhabananda hopes to capitalise on the perceived glamour of ‘western culture’ which he sees as having distracted India’s youth, and re-deploy it in ways which turn their attention back towards ‘their own culture’. Through this process, American, Norwegian, Korean and French bodies are directed to move, dress and speak like *sattriya* dancers and much of the feedback from the audience expressed surprise and joy at how convincingly they had carried this off. The international students were, as Bhabananda had wanted ‘mouldable’, because not trained dancers. However, these were bodies with histories, genders and opinions attached, and the act of transmitting a performance practice was sometimes met with gentle resistance. To a large degree, the actors were happy to leave aside or repress the discourses they have grown up with in the name of cultural relativism. They were more likely to express delight at this extraordinary trip to India, all expenses paid, for training with master performers. However, the moments of resistance mark the limits of the manoeuvrability of ‘foreign bodies’ in this cross-cultural exchange.

Conclusion

In *Performing Otherness: Java and Bali on International Stages, 1905-1952*, Cohen reflects on the significance of embodied encounters with the ‘other’.

The face-to-face encounter with Otherness is articulated in collaborations, friendships, love relations and social networks, fructifying in new ways of interrelating in the world. From a Levinasian perspective, assessing aesthetic value is thus less important than probing how embracing alterity in art shapes the contours of careers and lives. (Cohen 2010: 4).

The dance lessons described in this chapter, rather than simple exchanges of corporeal knowledge between bodies, are complex encounters which establish for the performers

in UKS, as well as their students these ‘new ways of interrelating in the world’. They are not simply teaching and learning but making new friends, networking, and accessing different forms of mobility across unequal power structures.

Short-term workshops and learning opportunities give leisure learners the opportunity to gain access, through embodied encounters, to dance cultures beyond their own. Bhabananda Barbayan, Govinda Kalita and other *bhakats* from UKS have made the most of this leisure industry by publicising interactions with foreigners at UKS, in Guwahati and in England through social media, television and staged productions. Doing so demonstrates to local audiences that *sattriya* arts are desirable and valued internationally. Whilst proponents of Sattriya dance have sought validation through gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the nation state and over-looked Assamese audiences in the process (as discussed in Chapter Three), the *bhakats* of my study engage international recognition to mobilise a local support base. Through their international teaching activities, Bhabananda and Govinda have been able to reclaim ownership over the representation of their artistic practices abroad as well as their image in the eyes of local audiences.

At the same time, by using foreigners to dance a *bhaona*, Bhabananda was able to attract large urban audiences to a non-classicised production. This is therefore a useful case study to demonstrate the creation of value for middle class urban audiences which did not need to navigate nationally produced aesthetic norms. Bhabananda was able to produce innovative, collaborative and outward-looking work whilst staying true to the norms and structures of a *bhaona* performance, without altering the work, as with the *cali nach* discussed in Chapter Three, to look more like other national forms. Engagement with foreign learners also built long-term friendships and a sense of reciprocity with those with connections in international cultural circuits. Teaching and learning dance allows teachers and learners who frequently have no common language to communicate, joke and form friendships which would be difficult in any interactions requiring verbal exchange. Many of the foreign students who have learned from Bhabananda, Govinda and others for little or no monetary exchange have demonstrated a desire to ‘give something back’ by organising opportunities for them to perform abroad.

Conclusion

What insights have been gained through this study of a localised Indian dance form ‘going places’? And how does engaging with Graeber’s theory of gift economies assist new ways of seeing and thinking about the classicisation and globalisation of dance? In this final chapter, I will discuss three principal observations that I have been able to make in this research, their implications for South Asia studies and dance studies, and the potential future research that it points to. I will also discuss the limitations of this thesis and think about how future research would allow me to overcome them.

In order to analyse how mobilising performance practices into new arenas creates value, both for practitioners and for audiences and stakeholders, I centred my ethnography and analysis on the work of *bhakats* from UKS on Majuli Island, northeast India, with a particular focus on creative director *bhakat* Bhabananda Barbayan and my dance teacher and key informant Govinda Kalita. I focused on three main case studies which explore different modes of ‘mobilisation’ of *sattriya* arts: onto proscenium stages as the new nationally recognised form ‘Sattriya’; onto various stages on a tour of the UK; and onto the bodies of foreign students, tourists and workshop participants both ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’. Throughout this analysis, I have taken inspiration from Graeber’s theory of value, constructed around his reading of the anthropology of gift economies, in order to consider the various motivations for ‘giving’ dance away on national and international platforms and to foreign learners, and the ways in which new and valuable connections are formed in the process.

I have tackled these questions using three main approaches. The first is ‘mobile’ and ‘embodied’ ethnography, in India and in the UK, which allowed me to understand lived practice: what the *bhakats* do when preparing and creating performances for mobilisation in new contexts. Following a small troupe of particularly mobile *bhakats* from UKS, I observed how a marginalised performing community invites recognition from national institutions and gatekeepers, through their creative practice. The second is literary criticism, which I have used to identify the discourses which underlie the narratives, categories and representational techniques used by Indian and British cultural gatekeepers in framing and describing *sattriya* arts in published literature and online. I have also contextualised these within the histories of the SNA and the ICCR,

the institutions whose values pervade contemporary discourse surrounding Indian performing arts. My third approach was performance analysis of two dances, one taught to me by *bhakat* Govinda Kalita (the *cali nach*), and the other specially choreographed and directed by Bhabananda for a UK tour (the *Vrindavani Paal*). Close analyses revealed how value is created by performing dances in new places, and re-organising and foregrounding particular material. By understanding what aspects were brought from the *sattras* and what were introduced to ‘classicise’ or to ‘mobilise’ the work, I began to see how the performance landscape navigated by the *bhakat* is woven into dance itself.

Limitations of this thesis

This thesis only deals with the experiences and work of a small community of performers. As I explained in Chapter Two, UKS is especially well networked and I was led to it in search of a tourist itinerary, so this became a case study of an outward-facing, highly connected monastery. An exploration of Garamur Sattras or Auniati Sattras, wealthy *sattras* from the *brahma samhati*, also on Majuli Island and with huge influence throughout Assam—but far less visible in popular narratives of Assamese Vaishnavism at a national and international level—would probably yield very different results.

Time and space limitations, and my focus on ethnography and performance analysis, also had a bearing on the extent to which I was able to address historical questions. As Sattriya dance gains in popularity and fame, it is more pressing than ever to re-visit and update the work of Maheswar Neog and produce a critical history of the performance practices of Assam’s *sattras*, which I have only started to touch on here (mostly in Chapters Two and Three). Further scholarship on the history of *sattras* arts and their recent transformations would provide a resource for Sattriya practitioners and promoters wishing to explain the origins of their dance form. The more that is known about the creative histories of *sattriya* performance practice, the harder it will be to wish it away in classicising narratives which favour a vision of the *sattras* as conservative centres of devotion. More work will therefore be required to understand the performance practices of other *sattras* in the *nika samhati* as well as from other *samhatas* more generally (see p. 79).

At the same time as broadening the research commenced in this thesis, there are various ways it could be taken forward by deepening its remit. More research needs to be done to do justice to the various different projects being undertaken by Bhabananda Barbayan, Govinda Kalita and the other active *bhakat*-performers of UKS. Since the UK tour in 2016, *bhakats* from UKS have travelled to Philadelphia, on another Vrindavani Vastra pilgrimage, conducted research in China, performed in Singapore, directed and performed in large-scale *bhaona* performances with local actors on Majuli island, and been involved with other collaborations that I have not been able to observe at close-quarters. Observation of all of these projects would yield a more detailed understanding of the Indian performance landscape, and the resources available to traditional performers hoping to secure resources, visibility and mobility for their work. Given the paucity of research on this area, I was unable to make a detailed comparison with the experiences of other living ‘original practitioners’ of classicised dance forms. Given the time and the space, I would have liked to compare the experiences of the *bhakats* of my study with those of other communities mobilising their dance forms, for example, Chhau dancers from West Bengal and Yakshagana from Karnataka from Kerala who are part of a drive to gain national recognition as ‘classical’ forms, and performing artists, particularly from communities marginalised by Indian mainstream culture, who have managed to tour abroad, for example the Manganiyar and Langa musicians from Rajasthan. Though I feel that many aspects of the experience of Assamese performers can inform our understanding of Indian performance landscape more broadly, their particular context in socially and politically marginalised Assam will yield different insights to ethnographies starting in other parts of this incredibly diverse nation.

My own gender, and family commitments were perhaps a limiting factor on my research, but, as I argue in Chapter One, it is extremely difficult to define what ‘might have been’ had I been in different circumstances, given the number of unknown factors and the many other subject positions I also embody (foreigner, entrepreneur-turned-scholar and so on). Being female in an all-male monastery was something I had foreseen as a potential limiting factor on my research, (see Chapter One). Indeed, when I first came to the monastery and realised that I would be taught, not ‘like the monks’, but ‘like the middle-class elite’ (which I am), I thought I would lose out on understanding monastic processes. However, my position was in fact extremely

fortuitous because I was able to observe *sattriya* practice on the one hand, whilst gaining an embodied understanding of the classical stream. The presence of my son Robi-Jo, whilst he was under the age of two, gave me an even closer understanding of monastic pedagogy than, perhaps, even a male researcher would have been able to acquire. Robi-Jo's acquisition of *sattriya* arts, including *mati akhara*, both within and beyond my lessons gave me an insight into a method of teaching that is not demarcated by official sessions, or broken down into small learnable fragments, but picked up through listening, copying, and a combination of competition, discipline and play. Like the young Manganiyar of Rajasthan, as demonstrated in Magriel's film *Growing into Music* (Magriel 2011) Robi-Jo learned 'via osmosis'. Moreover, his presence helped the *bhakats* and me spend long periods of time together—both in India and on the UK tour—without any need for language: the presence of a toddler amongst a community used to raising small boys put everyone at ease.

My lack of Assamese language skills was, however, a significant limitation for my research. Because I have studied Bengali, and the script is almost identical to Assamese script, I can follow songs or plays written in Assamese, but I have not been able to use any Assamese language scholarship, except for the History of Kamalabari Sattrā by the former *sattradhikar* of UKS, for which I commissioned a translation. My interviews and day-to-day conversations were therefore either in Hindi or in English, or with the presence of a translator. This has inevitably biased my discussion towards Hindi and English speakers, with whom I was most easily able to converse, and towards English-language scholarship. For future studies, I will certainly need to improve my comprehension of Assamese.

Graeber's theory of gift value has provided me with a theoretical approach that allows me to follow the actions of the performers of my study through various arenas, rather than approaching this topic as an example of a revival, or an instance of forces of globalisation enacting changes on a community from the top-down. Graeber is not the only theorist I could have used to consider these practices; for example, writing by Bourdieu on different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1973; 1977). I have limited my consideration of 'value' according to gift economics because, as I argued in the Introduction, it provided me with a convincing approach which foregrounded the actions of individuals involved in a non-commercial enterprise aimed at making social

connections for their own sake, rather than having to reduce community-building to individualism.

Principle observations

Within these limitations, through my ethnographic, scholarly and professional engagement with a group of performers ‘mobilising’ their dance form, I have been able to make three main observations, with a number of implications. Firstly, by following the activities of performing artists through multiple arenas, I have demonstrated that despite the value of the dance changing for the consumer, it is possible to perceive a continuity of intention for the *bhakat* practitioners. They are not simply swayed and controlled by external factors, they are in fact actively producing the national and global networks they navigate. The second insight is found by looking closely at the work that is consumed at a national and international level which demonstrates that in order to be recognised as ‘classical’ by the nation state, the *bhakats* much change their dance form. Material is selected and rejected on the basis of its ability to satisfy national norms regulated by government cultural institutions. This also effects the sort of work which is represented overseas. The third main observation is that the *bhakats* also have created ways of mobilising their dance forms beyond the reach of these national discourses. One example of this was through their strategic ‘giving away’ of dance to foreign students, which led to access to a re-claiming of self-representation, via television, Facebook and when performing traditional *bhaona* on the proscenium arch stage but using ‘foreign bodies’ as the mode of transmission.

i. ‘Continuity of intention’

Focusing on the perspective of a community of *bhakats* participating in various ‘parallel traditions’ (Shay 2014) allowed me to make a comparison across various disciplinary approaches to the mobilisation of dance which are rarely studied in tandem. Considering the discourses and processes of national revival alongside those of international tourism and casual dance pedagogy has led to a useful contribution to these often distinct fields. In considering various sites of dance mobility, I have been able to observe a continuity of intention across the various sites in which *sattr*a arts are mobilised. In Chapter Three I showed that *sattriya* dances were developed as tools for proselytisation and for

bringing people together to celebrate Krishna. Engaging with nationalising discourses, and re-shaping work for the UK tour are understood to fulfil these same functions. For the *bhakats* of my study, there is therefore no incongruity in reshaping and re-staging these practices to perform these functions in new contexts. The implications of this are twofold. In the context of the scholarship of Assamese Vaishnavism, this serves to counter the dichotomies which have been set up in revivalist narratives (as discussed in Chapter Three) which represent *bhakats* as the introverted and traditionalist ‘other’ to the modern national ‘self’. Looking beyond these representations, it becomes possible to recognise that *sattras* staged performances to large crowds and on modern proscenium stages before urban modernists intervened. Re-organising the *cali nach* for the stage, or the *jhumura* for a performance at the British Museum is done in order to make its value as a mode of communication remain constant.

The second implication of this ‘continuity of intention’ across various sites of performance is to break down the hierarchical relationship between ‘authentic’ and ‘revived’ material. As I argued in Chapter One, one of the central tensions in studies of dance ‘on the move’—rendered palatable for new audiences in changed contexts—is the potential loss of authenticity. However, by looking closely at the structure of the dances, and engaging with the choreographers to understand artistic intention, it becomes obvious that as far as the artists are concerned, they are creating ‘authentic’ work. As Shay argues:

[T]he individuals who spend hours perfecting their performance generally believe deeply in the choreographic activities in which they participate and thus endow these performances with a kind of authenticity. (Shay 2014: 622).

Moreover, by showing that the values of proselytization and communality which are at the heart of *sattriya* culture are also served by classicising the art form and preparing it for international tour, this thesis provides a counter-balance to nativizing projects which seek to prioritise ‘origins’ and ‘roots’ over newer hybrid manifestations of culture.

At each point, I have been interested in the relationship between the actions of the artistic producer and the discourses and institutions which are navigated in order to mobilise arts. What connections need to be made, what changes need to be wrought and what conscious and unconscious acts of selection are made in the process of getting a show on the road? Looking at performance practices in transit in this way creates a rich

picture of the relational, contingent nature of artistic production on the move, without enacting a hierarchical relationship between ‘old’ and ‘new’ iterations.

Abhinaya in the re-structured *cali nach*, for example, was a response to the *shastric* requirements of state institutions; the splicing together of various *sattriya* dance elements into a single solo dance reflected the performance norms of an Indian dance destined for the proscenium stage. The *Vrindavani Paal* similarly reveals similar pathways of production, with a *jhumura* dance re-worked as a *vandana* to meet institutional Indian (national) requirements of a dance mobilised as ‘classical’ and a *gayan bayan* re-positioned as a finale catering to Western (‘international’) aesthetics. Both of these were done by design, by the deliberate actions of thoughtful practitioners, not products of some putative “unthinking” “collective” tradition.

Because UKS was implicated in the formation of the modern state of Assam, and has subsequently been of interest to middle-class elites, and also because of the particular personal attributes of Bhabananda Barbayan and Govinda Kalita, the *bhakats* of my research have managed to ‘break into’ this circumscribed environment, and avail of some of its opportunities. Their accessibility to me, the entrepreneur and researcher, along these lines of power, allowed me to gain access to their institution and examine its processes and ways of working.

ii. Performing arts for a middle-class nation

The first observation that this thesis demonstrates, of particular significance to South Asian studies, is that (1) the discourses of India’s early nation builders continue to have tangible effects in cultural discourse and practice today, and (2) that India’s cultural institutions, run by middle- and upper-caste elites, by and large continue to favour middle-class practitioners and perpetuate their mobility, at the expense of other classes of performer. Middle-class institutions seeking to support and recognise localised dances still end up re-constructing them in their own image. The discourses and pathways available to Indian performing artists to access visibility, resources and mobility therefore appear rather narrow and uniform. Access lies in conformity with nation-state values; and to gain the approval of the nation state, dances need to homogenise. However, by spending time with and observing the work of the *bhakats* of UKS, I was able to make another, more significant observation—that (3) mobilising

sattriya dance, in various manners, has satisfied Assamese Vaishnavite values of proselytization about Lord Krishna and bringing people into relation via dance and song. Moreover, this mobilisation is not limited to revivalist processes: *bhakats* have built their own networks beyond the discourses of the nation state.

Writing which seeks to persuade readers that *Sattriya* is ‘classical’, and work to reconstruct *sattriya* arts in readiness for consumption on national platforms, still reflect nationalist narratives rooted in the colonial era. Revivalists working in the 1930s and 1940s to create new national dance forms out of the performance practices of *devadasis* and *tawaijs* looked to ancient treatises as their frames of reference. This tendency was part of a broader desire to create an image of the nation as ancient and Hindu, untainted by Mughal and British influence. ‘Tendency’ became ‘institution’ after Independence in 1947, as demonstration of *shastric* elements became a necessary condition for dance forms to be categorised as classical by the SNA and the ICCR.

The *sattriya* story demonstrates the continued potency of this narrative, both at the level of representation and of practice. At the level of representation, Kothari discusses *sattriya* arts under shastric terms like *Nritta* and *Nritya* (2013e) and K Bora argues that *bhaona* and *oja pāli* constitute the *abhinaya* of *sattriya* performance (K Bora 2013), as discussed above. In my ethnographic research, I noted manifestation of the same tendency in the creation of dances considered ‘classical’. In the ‘auditorium’ *cali nach* Govinda taught me, sections of mimesis (meaningful gestures) were inserted into items that in their original setting consist only of ‘pure’ dance, in ways that conformed to *shastric* and thereby officially ‘classical’ norms.

Another trait of early Indian nationalism that continues to resonate in today’s cultural scene, is the prioritisation of a middle-class perspective in dance discourse and institutional practice, leading to the domination of middle-class performers in a homogenous dance scene. In 1943, Rukmini Arundale pronounced that ‘I’m happy [...] I was able to prove we could do without them’ (cited in Allen 1997: 64, 65). According to Allen, the dance establishment Arundale represented and imagined as her audience as ‘we’ were the middle and upper classes, while the ‘them’ were the denigrated, lower-caste hereditary professionals (ibid. 65). A continuing dominance of a middle-class, elitist perspective is evident in current representations of *sattriya* dance that claim the *sattriya* arts did not have ‘an audience’ until the revivalist interventions which created *Sattriya* dance. In fact, *sattriya* arts did have and continue to attract enormous

audiences, as I argued in Chapter Three—but apparently, according to revivalist narratives, they were of the wrong sort. In such narratives, claims that *sattriya* arts had ‘no audience’ really imply they had ‘no middle-class audience’. Now that middle-class, urban people patronise *sattriya* arts it ‘has an audience’. Equally, when it is claimed ‘there was less focus on aesthetics’ authors mean ‘they didn’t cater to middle-class aesthetics’. Neog observed in the 1950s that *sattriya* arts were beautiful, and were designed to attract people with various sensibilities, but in a framework which favours middle-class audiences, it is adaptation to the proscenium stage and the requisite balance of ‘classical’ characteristics which count. Such a bias is reproduced in institutional practice, as is evidenced by the ICCR empanelled lists which feature predominantly middle-class, mobile young women, rather than *bhakats*. Bourdieu’s comment is salient here, that ‘the inheritance of cultural wealth which has been accumulated and bequeathed by previous generations only really belongs (although it is *theoretically* offered to everyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves (1973: 493).’ Middle-class institutions, formed with middle-class artists and audiences in mind, favour middle-class artists. Thus, it is the reconstructed forms, which the middle-class practice, that dominate India’s performance scene.

One of the reasons middle-class interventions remain hidden, and therefore unchallenged, is because the language of revival obfuscates internal change or outside influences. Revivalist narratives, in seeking ‘the sanction of precedent’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 2) and wanting to connect present practices to a past ‘golden age’, often create a picture of unchanging tradition. The scholarship around *sattriya* arts is typical in this respect: narratives which draw an unbroken link from the first productions of *ankiya bhaonas* during the time of Sankaradeva to contemporary monastic practice and thence to the proscenium stage efface both the creativity of the *bhakats* of the past who, over the years, drew on multiple sources and embellished and re-contextualised performance practices to serve various functions; and also the creativity of contemporary practitioners—both from within and beyond the *sattri*—working to innovate *sattriya* arts within its classicised form. In literature and conversations about Sattriya dance, as with so many revivals, there appears to be an unwritten rule that this reconstructive work must not be mentioned, in case, perhaps, it undermines claims to classicality and authenticity. Because the language of continuity and revival is in opposition to the idea of choreography, then, Bhabananda would not normally be credited for his work. I

break this rule in my thesis, ‘showing the workings’ of dance that is perceived as classical. By doing so I reveal the agency and creativity of the artists involved in its production. This provides evidence of a sustained artistic practice that combines reproduction and creative innovation, and which exists beyond the middle-class and elite institutions.

iii. Creating value beyond the nation state

By looking at a variety of ways in which the *bhakats* of my study mobilise their dance practices, I was able to observe that as well as creating work which satisfied nationalistic discourses (through sanskritisation and engagement with modern academy-style teaching practices academies and the proscenium arch stage), they were able to mobilise *sattriya* arts on their own terms. Evidence for this was to be found in the production of *Vrindavani Paal*, which, as well as the classicised elements (such as the ‘*Vandana*’), performance styles like *oja-pali* and *gayan bayan* were included, as well as demonstrations of *mati-akhara*. These are all styles which are side-lined in accounts of *sattriya* arts which are trying to make a case for their classicality. They are also not required by exponents of Sattriya dance who make it to the ICCR ‘empanelled’ list, and therefore, due to the paucity of *bhakats* on that list, very rarely gain a platform overseas. The *bhakats* of my study thereby provided a rare example of the mobilisation of *sattriya* arts on an international tour, which was able to reach beyond the strictures of nationally approved material. Further evidence was to be found in the way that Bhabananda Barbayan and Govinda Kalita’s connections with French, British and American dancers led them to gain visibility in the press and in front of middle-class Assamese audiences on their own terms. Through performances of ‘international *bhaona*’, Bhabananda understood the value of ‘the west’ to local audiences and realised that traditional performances of Sanakaradeva’s plays would be valued locally when seen to be performed by international performers. Thus, he did not have to cut out content deemed unsuitable for a ‘classical dance form’ which would usually gain a platform on a proscenium arch stage in Guwahati. Both Bhabananda and Govinda have ‘given’ their dance form away to foreign students who have eventually produced and fundraised for international tours. This has also allowed them to mobilise their dance practices beyond the channels of the nation state.

These moments—in which performers are able to create new work, and go beyond the macro-structures in which they operate—help to illustrate what Graeber describes as ‘creating value through human action’ (Graeber 2001:45). In contrast to the notion of ‘regimes of value’ (Appadurai 1986, cited in Graeber 30) which lead us to imagine pre-existing realms of value which individuals attempt to access, here we see the active production of social networks, through the medium of dance.

Implications of these observations

These observations, and the methodologies I have used to collect them, have potential implications for critical dance studies in India and scholarship around the nationalisation and globalisation of dance more broadly. Of note, in South Asian dance scholarship, is the new perspective it sheds on engagements of artists with the revival of their art form. Scholars of South Asian performance have shown that the original practitioners of many of India’s other classical dance forms suffered stigmatisation and marginalisation during the revival of their performance practices over the course of the twentieth century. Ethnographic work on the aftermath of previous classical revivals finds female hereditary performers working in ‘illicit’ environments (Morcom 2014) or not finding work at all (Soneji 2012). Traditional artists who successfully made the transition to modern ‘classical’ dancers, as Walker observes in the Kathak revival story, ‘distanced themselves from any connection with a professional past’. This resulted in the case of Hindustani traditions in ‘a forced peeling apart of music and dance’ (Walker 2014a: 95–6). Walker shows that although ‘Indian courtesans through the ages have been described as performing dance-songs,’ in the post-colonial context, many former *tawaiifs* simply stopped dancing as ‘there was a stigma associated with female dancing that was not applied as rigorously to singing’ (ibid. 96):

The former *tawā'ifs* who remained on the concert stage and in the recording studio as singers ceased dancing and often distanced themselves from it, eschewing any sort of gesture or eye contact. Former courtesans as ‘amateur’ singers could begin to forge a new identity—as ‘dancing girls’, they could not. The women who were supposedly responsible for the degeneration of North Indian culture therefore became a nameless, faceless group of women from the past. (ibid. 96).

To date, therefore, there are few if any examples in the scholarly literature of viable alternative systems of performance practice today lying outside the control of the

dominant nation-state discourses and in the hands of the original holders. Though the hereditary *kathaks* have been presented as ‘traditional practitioners’, and wield significant influence in Kathak dance scene, as Walker has demonstrated, they have had to completely buy into middle-class nation-state discourses in order to attain and retain hegemony (Walker 2014a: 14-17). This includes adopting a Brahmin identity, which, as Walker argues, was a conferred identity, produced by post-colonial scholarship, rather than corresponding to inherited connection to that caste (Walker 2014a : 84-88). It has also involved participating in the exclusion of the mostly female practitioners who cultivated what we now know as Kathak dance (89-98). Either an artist buys into the middle-class systems, or he or she fails.

My ethnographic work with the *bhakats* of UKS thus describes, for the first time, a post-revival scenario in which the institutions of one set of ‘original practitioners’, at least, are thriving independently of state structures. Yes, the performers in my study have adopted new middle-class-friendly styles in order to access ‘the concert stage’, and yes, they have achieved mobility within and beyond India through state institutions. But the training, the examinations, and a broader repertoire of performance practices remain and thrive within the control of the *sattra*.

An example from my fieldwork helps to illustrate this. While I was staying in UKS in August 2015, ‘Gopal’,⁵ one of the *bhakats* I knew quite well because he had been part of the tour in Bhutan earlier that year, came to the monastery guesthouse and invited me to come to his *mohola*, an examination which would lead to his ‘promotion’ as a performer, according to the *sattra* system of artistic merit and knowledge. The following day, I went to the *namghar* and joined the *bhakats*, family members and friends who had come to watch Gopal’s performance and the senior *adhiyapaks* (teachers) who were the examiners. He led a performance of *oja pāli*, the storytelling genre described in Chapter Six that is only taught to *bhakats*, in which the *oja*—in this case the *bhakat* taking his examination—speaks and sings episodes from an epic, and illustrates the meaning of his story through mimetic gestures, while the *pāli*, the chorus, provides support through song, dance, and playing the *khuti-tal* (small cymbals). After the performance, I congratulated Gopal and asked him how he felt about the performance. After giving himself and the *pāli* a brief critique, he added: ‘I am happy I

⁵ I have not mentioned any of the names of the *bhakats* mentioned in this anecdote, because the comments were made in confidence and they may not be welcomed by the performer

learned it because the old man [who taught him] is getting old and doesn't think he can teach it to any more students' (fieldnote diary 24th August).

Later, one of the other *bhakats*, 'Hari', told me *bhakats* usually take this examination during their childhood and that, at twenty-five, Gopal had left this 'very late'. Hari in contrast had taken that same examination when he was 'about twelve'. A week before I had seen a fifteen-year-old *bhakat* take the same examination. Asked why he felt Gopal had waited so long to take the examination, Hari responded, "I don't know. Before, maybe he wasn't interested to study. *Oja pāli* takes a lot of time to remember everything. Now...Sattriya dance: the glamour has come up. So now maybe he wants to learn." Though Hari sounded disapproving of a possible glamour-seeking motivation, I found the whole situation rather hopeful. Though the attraction of the opportunities afforded by 'classicisation' may have motivated the young man to learn as an adult, the cultural resources he seeks are found within the *sattrā*, accessible through a traditional monastic relationship, and not mediated through middle-class appropriations. *Sattriya oja pāli* is not a form that can be learned outside the *sattrā*. Here was an example of the enduring strength of the *sattrā* to perpetuate arts without state intervention, even in the aftermath of a middle-class revival.

Though many of the most successful and mobile Sattriya teacher-practitioners—such as Naren Bora, Jatin Goswami, Govinda Saikia etc. (see Kothari 2013e: 110-141 for a list of the illustrious Sattriya exponents)—have left the *sattrā* and now work in academies and perform on proscenium stages and in urban centres, they received their training within the *sattrā* institution. My case study of the *sattrā*'s work and practices therefore constitutes an important contribution to dance scholarship, by including in its understanding of India's cultural landscape the possibility of artistic success and acceptability grown outside of state-sanctioned institutions.

Until now, dominant representations of Sattriya have sought to force it to appear like other Indian classical dances, whilst effacing the work that has gone into making it so and refusing to acknowledge that another, earlier form thrives in parallel which looks markedly different. My research also calls for an acknowledgement that a revival has taken place, and that both *bhakats* and outside agents have worked hard to re-shape traditional content and introduce new elements to prepare it for the national stage. Historicising Sattriya in this way helps to raise the profile of monastic work which will be overlooked if only 'Sattriya' is supported and discussed, and *sattriya* arts are

imagined away. My work joins a discussion already begun in the so far mostly unpublished work of scholars like S Goswami and Sethi working to understand the historical and political emergence of Sattriya. It also contributes to critical dance literature more broadly by providing the first case study of an Indian performing arts community whose practices have been recognised as ‘classical’ but which has managed to maintain its own repertoire separately from the ‘revived’ version, and has engaged the channels of middle-class and elitist power without having to ‘become’ the middle-class elite.

As well as these contributions to dance scholarship, this research has practical implications for India’s traditional musicians and those involved with promoting, touring, writing about and performing with them. Beyond academia, conversations abound about how best to serve the needs of traditionally excluded artists, to maintain performance worlds without stifling creativity; and to engage with tourism and the mass music industry without diluting or ‘dumbing down’ the material.

The way that the Indian state has supported *sattriya* arts so far has overwhelmingly benefitted urban middle-class female practitioners, and produced a new style of ‘Sattriya’ dance which bears more than a passing resemblance to Odissi, Kathak and Bharatnatyam. If the state model effaces traditional musicians and forces art forms out of their original settings and into new state-sanctioned forms, what other models might be available to practitioners and musicians working in contemporary India? UKS represents an institution with a thriving system of pedagogy, examination and performance training which does not have to adhere to state definitions of cultural value, though it makes use of them when it needs to. What are the models in India for supporting such alternative systems—what Indrani Chatterjee has identified as ‘monastic governmentality’ (I Chatterjee 2013a and 2013b)—without dramatically altering the art form or changing who performs it?

The questions arising out of this research points to a number of exciting research pathways. There is much scope for future research exploring models of sustainable, locally-relevant musical reproduction which exist in India but are being ignored by current statist policy. To expand on and deepen the observations of this thesis, more research is needed to understand how and in what forms systems of support and pedagogy of performance, like the *sattria* institutions, persist in post-colonial, capitalist, twenty-first-century India. Erdman 1985, I Chatterjee 2013a and 2013b and Miller 1992

have explored the systems of patronage which sustained India's 'traditional' forms in the past, and such work should provide the framework for any studies seeking to understand local musical systems in the present. Schippers and Grant have been working cross-culturally to understand all the factors which allow a musical system to thrive—envisaged as a 'musical ecosystem'— with a practical application as 'guidance to empower communities wishing to develop strategies that help sustain their own music cultures.' (Schippers and Grant 2016). Research which combines this holistic approach to studying performance cultures in India with a understanding of non-state traditional patronage patterns would make an important contribution to scholarship on contemporary Indian performance practices, and would have important implications for policy and practice.

Another important contribution made by this thesis is in producing a grounded ethnographic study of a marginalised group of musicians on an international tour. Although performers constitute a significant category of short-term migrant labour, their movement patterns, and the art which they carry across borders has received very little attention. The few ethnographies of 'music on the move' have focused on American and European artists travelling within established touring circuits. Given the relative ease of these sorts of movements, and the relative affluence of those making them, it is not always easy to see the borders and gatekeepers that enable and restrict their movements. Equally, a study of an artist travelling to perform for people who already share aesthetic and social values does not demand the scrutiny of these values. Considering the work involved in mobilising art for a socially, economically, regionally marginalised group, on the other hand, throws these processes into relief. Before travelling to the UK, local artists in India need to build their own foreign contacts, to work for the approval of national institutions like the SNA and the ICCR, develop new projects which will suit international venues. Analysing the process of re-arranging material in order to have one's value recognised abroad highlights the assumptions and systems which organise cultural exchange which might be missed if the culture being exchanged seamlessly fits with those assumptions and systems. In Chapter Four, I showed that taking the *bhakats* to perform in Newcastle and to offer workshops in Somerset House was a physical manifestation of ACE values. Many performers in the UK and Europe have been to schools visited regularly by touring performers. For such artists, the value of touring and workshopping arts is normalised and thus built into their own expectation of 'being

an artist'. For the *bhakats* of my study, going beyond London was not even a consideration. They were interested in seeing iconic sights of London including, importantly, the 'Vrindavani Vastra'. They had no notion of the country beyond London and, like many non-cosmopolitan Indians, they often slip between calling England 'London' and vice-versa. The routes and movements of a cultural minority within the idiom of a more dominant cultural context paint a map of the power structures they navigate.

By thinking through various types of 'mobilisation' of dance in one study—national, international mobility, and also the phenomenon of teaching foreigners to dance—this study also suggests the potential of studying dance mobility through the multiple but related practices of artists, rather than taking the site of exchange: revival, commodification, tourism, as the point of departure. In doing so, it locates the 'other' of this research as the cultural systems navigated by the artists, as opposed to the *bhakats* themselves. Their intention to propagate the story of Krishna and to bring people into relation through dance is the driving force behind the mobilisation of their art form, rather than, as in many studies of belly dancing and salsa (as explored in Chapter One), which see the original practitioners only motivated to mobilise their culture through its earning potential. This resonates with Graeber's call, when considering cultural exchange, not to limit our questions to economic value and the concomitant overemphasis of the consumer perspective, but to understand the 'gift' of dance from the perspective of the giver.

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Appendix I - *Vrindavani Paal*: anatomy of a toured dance

In the following pages, I provide a detailed move-by-move description of large sections of the performance of *Vrindavani Paal* (discussed in Chapters Four and Five) which uses images, Western staff notation, transcriptions of Assamese and Sanskrit songs and an annotated accompanying film to help the reader to understand the structure and content of a one-hour dance-drama performance. The dance and music described here form an original choreography by Bhabananda Barbayan performed by monks from UKS, Assam and two other Assamese performers in the British Museum, London on 8th July 2016. The performance inaugurated the very first UK tour by a troupe of Assamese Vaishnavite monks. The reasons for including this detailed description as an appendix to my thesis are threefold. Firstly Sattriya dance as a commodified, tourable form is a very recent phenomenon, which has so far received very little musicological attention. Though Assamese Vaishnavite performance practices were documented thoroughly in the 1950s and 60s, with the particular intention of proving and promoting their classical status, the structure of the contemporary form has been neglected. This is partly due to the classicised form's relative newness, and partly due to a reluctance to lay open the differences between what Sattriya dancers perform today on the concert stage, and the monastic practices on which they are based.

Secondly, this serves a record of a choreography by a single creative agent for a special one-off event, and thus resists the 'die-hard traditionalists' narrative which casts the *bhakats* of the Assamese monasteries as the conservative, anonymous, collective 'other' of the urban middle-class proponents of Sattriya. The choreographer, Bhabananda Barbayan, has a deep knowledge of inherited performance traditions, some of them with centuries-long lineages, which is what give the dance performance its depth and complexity—but the precise way he constructs the new dance for a UK tour requires innovation, experimentation and a thoroughly contemporary understanding of national and international performance norms which scholars have previously underplayed or completely ignored in their accounts of monastic practice. Bhabananda comes from a tradition of outward-looking and innovative monks who have been present and active at every stage of Sattriya's renaissance, but whose input is underestimated in most accounts.

Thirdly, this description provides rich illustrative material for the analysis in Chapters Four and Five, which refer to the images and descriptions below. Laying out the structure and performance choices of this choreography and knowing what parts of a performance culture are carried wholesale, what are left behind and what are newly invented, will help to demonstrate how Bhabananda Barbayan prepared a local Indian dance for global export. This gives dance historians materials for re-constructing the processes of classicisation and ‘worlding’, even as these processes are being denied and obfuscated by dominant narratives.

Transcribing *Vrindavani Paal*

Like all ephemeral arts, dance is difficult to document (see Hall 1964; Hutchinson Guest 1998 for discussions of choreology). And for Sattriya dance, most accounts simply recycle the same information about the context, history and impact of *sattrā* performance practices and the fact of their repositioning on the metropolitan stage, without presenting details of performance content. Exceptions are Chakravorty and Neog’s *Rhythm in the Vaishnava music of Assam* (1962) which includes transcriptions of the rhythms of thirty-five dances practised in Assamese monasteries in the 1950s and 60s; and Bhabananda Barbayan’s extensive documentation and comparative analysis of sattriya *tāls* and some *rags* in his doctoral thesis (Hazarika 2014). Neither of these give details of the physical movements of the performers that correspond to these rhythms, however. Neog’s detailed account of an entire performance of Sankaradeva’s play *Rama-Vijaya* contains photographs, sketches showing performance layout, order of performance items, the timing and mode of entry for each artist, details of *rāg* and *tāl* and a plot overview (Neog 1983 and 2008: 164-217). Read together with the script of the play and the relevant section of Chakravorty and Neog’s work (364–382), Neog’s work on *Rama-Vijaya* affords an extremely useful, and unique, record of *bhaona* conventions in the 1950s when Neog was conducting his fieldwork. M M Sarma and Dutta’s article ‘Baresahariya Bhaona’ (2009) is also useful for details about the related practice of multiple simultaneous performances of *Bhaona*, but when it comes to the dance movements of the artists, the account becomes vague, with phrases like: ‘The actor playing Krishna dances in classical style’ (ibid. 306) and ‘The actors dance rhythmically’ (315), with no further explanation. The photographs and descriptions in Kothari 2013e and A Mahanta 2011 helped me to name some of the dance moves that I

had learnt while in UKS, but both are difficult to interpret without some embodied knowledge of the dance form. These sources have been useful in understanding some of the sources and vocabulary used to create *Vrindavani Paal*, and to separate the ‘traditional’—that which we know predates the major classicisation processes of the second half of the twentieth century and is currently performed in the *namghar*—from the ‘composed’—that which is only found beyond the monastery gates. However the isolation of the dance moves could only be done through close observation of video footage, ethnographic observation of dancing in the monasteries, and discussions with Govinda and Bhabananda aided with video footage; this often involved Govinda or Bhabananda working with me in the role of ‘pupil’ in a part danced-part-spoken dialogue.

This description should be read alongside video footage of the dance it describes. This can be accessed here: https://youtu.be/htPTxVHf_5Q. The numbered text here corresponds to numbered subtitles in the film. I have included stills from the film to avoid excessive switching between text and film, but I urge the reader to refer to the film as much as possible. Timings (mm:ss) indicate the start point of a series of movements. I will offer literal translations and brief explanations with each new technical term as they occur, but more detail and critical analysis of terms and the performance practices they refer to can be found in Chapter Five.

My focus is primarily on the dance, rather than the music, therefore the limited musical examples are included to offer basic signposting, rather than forming the basis of an analysis in their own right. I have also been selective in the level of detail I offer of the dance, due to restrictions of space. The dance is divided and subdivided at many levels, as shown in the ‘Performance Structure’ on page 260. Though each subdivision is different—there is very little repetition in the entire one hour dance—some demonstrate the same kinds of choreographic choices. Where this is the case, I will not describe these subsections at the same minute level, unless they will illustrate a point in the main body of the thesis that is not illustrated elsewhere. For example, the specific ways in which dance movements are employed in Item 1: *Mati Akhara* demonstrate the re-shaping and re-contextualisation of *sattrā* performance practices in an international setting, and therefore this item is examined with some care. On the other hand, it is the placing, rather than the structural arrangement of Item 5: *Gayan Bayan* which points to Bhabananda’s choreographic interventions, and so I only provide the framework of this

item. Within Item 2: *Vandana*, there are three songs. I have only provided detailed descriptions of the first three verses of each of the songs, and, once a pattern is established, I provide only a basic outline.

The technical description which follows was made possible through a combination of methods. The performance was filmed in high resolution on a Canon C300 and a Canon 5D and a zoom sound recorder by filmmakers Kashfi Halford and Aixa Figini, who filmed the entire UK tour. I used iMovie and Wondershare to edit the raw footage of the performance into one continuous file, from which I wrote a long narrative transcription and a list of some forty questions for Bhabananda. Bhabananda and I exchanged dozens of emails and hundreds of WhatsApp messages in which Bhabananda sent me information on the instruments, costumes and props, transcriptions and translations of the songs used in the performance and notes about their provenance and contemporary use. I had begun to create a file of screenshots from the film showing hand positions and dance moves which I was planning to send to Bhabananda for further clarification, but it became clear that in order to understand certain movements and their order, we would have to refer to the moving image. Fortuitously, in April 2017, Bhabananda undertook one of his now regular trips to Paris, organised by his Parisian student, Odissi exponent Mahina Khanum. I was able to spend two days with Bhabananda in Paris and conducted an extended interview (five hours on 22nd April, two hours on 23rd) in front of my video footage of *Vrindavani Paal*. (I refer to this interview as ‘Paris interview 2017’ throughout the thesis. I later sent him sections of the annotated film which accompanies this thesis, with further lists of questions. Drawing from these extensive communications with Bhabananda, ethnographic fieldwork with the performers both in Assam and London, and referring to secondary sources, I was able to construct the description below.

Vrindavani Paal was performed four times during the UK tour: twice without an interval break (at the British Museum and at the Sage, Gateshead), once in three separate parts, with long breaks between items (at King’s College, London), and once with a single interval after Item 2 (the Barn at Bury Court). At the Newcastle Hindu Temple, only Items 4 and 5 were performed. Apart from these differences, and slight alterations to dancers’ positioning made necessary by the various performance spaces, the choreography and music remained the same throughout the tour, even sections which seem to be ‘improvised’ were almost identical. Much of the following description

therefore, is common to each of these performances. I choose the British Museum performance here because, as I demonstrated in Chapter Four, it was the lynchpin venue; the tour took place at the time and in the fashion that it did because of the timing of the British Museum's exhibition about Assam, and my consequent collaboration with British Museum curator Richard Blurton. Furthermore, Bhabananda choreographed the dance with the British Museum's 'Vrindavani Vastra' textile, the centrepiece of the exhibition, in mind—the dance is named after the textile.

The *Vrindavani Paal*: Performance description

Before the show

People started to assemble in the Great Hall of the British Museum almost an hour before the performance was due to start. The gathering crowd was made up of people who had seen the performance advertised through the marketing channels of the British Museum and Sound Travels (my company), attendees and speakers from the conference 'Assam: textile transmission and the performance of dance' as well as those who happened to be in the British Museum at the time and were drawn by the sights and sounds of white-clad performers setting up the stage and sound checking interesting-looking instruments. A small sign explained what was happening to these chance audience members (see Figure 18). The stage area backed onto the cylindrical reading room at the centre of the Great Hall, which was partially obscured by screens—two temporary and one permanent—which served to create an 'off-stage' changing area. Small uplights shone on the screens, making little impact given the brightness of the glass-domed hall at 6.30pm in the height of the British summer. Delineating stage left was a length of white sheeting laid on the floor, arrayed with microphones on low stands, a *khol* drum, some *bhortals* and a violin case. The front of the 'stage' area was demarcated by five *khol* drums laid on the ground and covered with *gamosa* – traditional red and white Assamese scarves, at the centre of which stood a small arch representing a miniature *agnigarh*, or 'gateway of light'.¹

¹ In traditional *Bhaona* performances, the actors and musicians would pass underneath a larger, less ornate *agnigarh* as they entered the performance space. For a detailed discussion and images of the *agnigarh*, see Chapter Five.



Figure 18: Sign announcing 'The dancing monks of Majuli Island' by the waiting audience at the Great Hall, British Museum

British Museum staff circulated printed programme notes and audience members took their places on the ground close to the *khol* barrier, on foldable chairs behind, or on the steps which spiral around to the right side of the reading room. Some stood behind the seats and a few came and went throughout the performance. The audience was divided at the centre for the camera crew to be able to film the whole show. By the time the performance began, some five hundred people had gathered.

When Bhabananda told me that the performance would start at least 30 minutes late, I stood up and gave an impromptu introduction. I explained the delay, thanked everyone for coming and then spoke about the relationship between the performance that was about to start, and the exhibition in Gallery 91. I said that the images woven into the 'Vrindavani Vastra' would be brought to life through the performance, thanked the various sponsors and supporters and then, seeing the monks approach from the other side of the Great Hall, asked the audience to give a round of applause to 'The Monks of Majuli'.

In the description which follows here, the italicised sections contain text from the programme notes based on a set list written by Bhabananda, edited by me, and then edited and formatted according to British Museum house style by Freddie Matthews, Head of Adult Learning at the British Museum.

Performance Structure²

Item 1: *Mati Akhara*³ - page 264

1.1 Opening Ritual

1.2 Sequence of *Mati Akhara* positions

1.2.1 Position 1

1.2.2 Position 2

1.2.3 Position 3

1.2.4 Position 4

1.2.5 Position 5

1.2.6 Position 6

1.2.7 Position 7

1.2.8 Position 8

1.2.9 Position 9

1.2.10 Position 10

1.2.11 Position 11

Item 2: *Vandana* (literally ‘homily’)⁴ – page 272

2.1 Song: ‘Megha Syamala’ (06:31 – 11:44)

² I will offer literal translations and brief explanations with each new technical term as they occur. More detail and critical analysis of terms and the performance practices they refer to are given in Chapter Five.

³ Literally translated as ‘ground exercises’. The meaning and use of *mati akhara* is discussed in Chapter Five, p. 205.

⁴ A ‘*vandana*’ is a written, spoken, sung or danced homily which enumerates and celebrates the beauty and attributes of one’s god or guru. For further discussion of its used here as part of a ‘Sattriya dance’, see p. 208.

Entrance and opening dance (no song)

Entrance

Opening dance

Free Rhythm section (with song)

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4

Line 5

Rhythm section (with song)

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4

Line 5

Line 6

Line 7

Line 8

2.2 Song: 'Mdhudanava Darana' (11:52 – 17:58)

Verse 1

Verse 2

Verse 3

Verse 5

Verse 9

2.3 Sloka Nach⁵: ‘Kripanga Upanga’ (18:00 – 19:20)

Lines 1 and 2

Line 3

Line 4

Item 3: *Vrindavani Paal* (Dance of Vrindavan) – page 305

3.1 *Oja pāli*-style performance ‘*Caturvimsati Avatara*’ (19:54 – 30:14)⁶

Instrumental

Entrance

Caron (the unmetered exploration of a *raga* using meaningless syllables)

Ghosha (a sung couplet)

Verse 1

Verse 2

Verse 3

Verse 4

Verse 5

Verse 7

Verse 9

Ghosha (repeat)

3.2 Bakasura - *bhaona*-style performance (30:17 – 34:42)

Introduction by *oja*

Solo by *oja*

Dance by Krishna and Balabadhra

⁵ An anonymous lyrical composition made up of Assamese and Sanskrit syllables which are traditionally recited by a *bayan*—a percussionist—before the same rhythm is played on the *khol*.

⁶ The danced storytelling style known as *oja pāli* is discussed on p. 80 and p. 211.

Dance by Bakasura

Dance-fight by Krishna and Bakasura

Krishna kills Bakasura

3.3 Kaliya Daman – danced dramatic performance (34:42 – 44:40)

Introduction by *oja*

Solo by *oja*

Dance by Kaliya daman

Dance by Cowherds

Action by Cowherds

Dance by Krishna

Dance by Krishna and Cowherds

Dance-fight by Krishna and Kaliya daman

Victorious dance by Krishna

Ghosha (repeat)

3.4 Kharmanar Nach⁷

Item 4: *Bhortal Nritya* (a dance with large cymbals) – page 326

4.1 Rhythmic introduction

4.2 Borgeet (devotional song) 1 – performers enter and begin dance

4.3 Dance accompanied by percussion only

4.4 Dance accompanied by *loyo hari naam* (Marked as ‘Borgeet 2’ in video), followed by short section to percussion only

Item 5: *Gayan Bayan*⁸ - Page 327

⁷ A dance used as a finale at the end of *ankiya bhaona* performances. See 3.4 below.

⁸ Dancing by a group of drummers—the *bayan*, and singers playing khuti-tal or small cymbals—the *gayan*. *Gayan bayan* was discussed in detail in Chapter Five, p. 216.

5.1 – Transition

5.2 – *Bahā-cāhini*

5.3 – *Na dhemali/ ram dhemali*

Detailed description

Item 1: *Mati Akhara* (00:08 – 06:25)

“Item 1: Mati Akhara (10-minute prelude part 1)

Krishna Kumar Saikia – Main dancer, performing Mati Akhara

Nirajan Saikia – Flute⁹

Dipendra Sarma – Sarinda¹⁰

Gobinda Kalita Bayan, Bolorama Saikia and Nitul Bora – Vocals

Pradip Neog and Dinannath Baruah – Prop handlers

The first two items are performed as a prastavana, a ‘prelude’ to prepare the rangabhumi (performance space) and to invoke god: the ultimate creator, preserver and destroyer of personal entities. The first item will begin with ritual lighting of the lamp accompanied by the divine sound of the flute. The dancer will enter the stage to Sanskrit verses, translated as:

May the illuminated soul be your guiding light

The dancer will then prepare body and mind for devotion through a series of yogic movements known as mati akhara.”¹¹

1.1 Opening ritual (00:08 – 02:42)

⁹ See Figure 19, second from the right, for an image of this instrument. ‘*Bāhī* is one of the most ancient and common instruments in the musical traditions of Assam, specially [sic] among tribal peoples. It is a simple cylindrical tube usually of bamboo of uniform bore. As it is made of *Bāh* (Bamboo) hence the name of flute is *Bāhī* in Assam. It is called *Bānsuri*, *Venu*, *Muruli* etc in other places of India.’ (Barthakur 2003: 118).

¹⁰ See Figure 19, far left, for an image of this instrument. ‘*Sārindā* (*Serjā*) is a well-known string instrument of Kamrup, Goalpara, North-Cachar and Darang regions of Assam. It is specially used by the Bodo tribes of Assam, and is known among them as *Serjā*.’ (Barthakur 2003: 133). See Bor 1987.

¹¹ Programme notes for British Museum event, by Bhabananda Barbayan. Edited by me and then by Freddie Matthews, Head of Adult Learning, British Museum before printing.

The performance opens (00:08) with Dipendra Sarma improvising on the *sarinda*. He is joined by Niranjan on a *bahi* – a large bamboo flute (00:30). They improvise in Rag Bhupali as Dinannath and Basanta enter (01:11) carrying a large white cloth between them at chest height, which Jadumani stands behind. Three more performers (Boloram, Nitul and Govinda) enter (01:17) and gather behind Basanta, as the musicians continue to play.



Figure 19: Entrance of the artists (left to right) Dipendra Sarma on *sarinda*, Dinannath Saikia, Jadumani Saikia, Nitul Bora, Basanta Neog, Baluram (obscured) by Niranjan Saikia on *basuri*, Govinda Kalita

They sing (01:29) the following Sanskrit verse from the Upanishads:

deepa jyoti param brahma

deepa jyoti janardam

deepa jyoti haret papang

deepa jyoti namah stute

The meaning of this is summarised by Bhabananda as: ‘May the illuminated soul be your guiding light.’ It is accompanied by the *sarinda* which repeats the melodic line that I have abstracted in its basic form (i.e. without ornamentation, which subtly varies) as

Melody 1 and which I shall refer to as *Deepa jyoti*; and the *bahi*, which embellishes between sections.



Melody 1

As soon as the singers start to sing *Deepa Jyoti* to Melody 1 (01:29) the *sarinda* and *flute* join in with the same melodic line. Dinanath gathers up the cloth (01:38) revealing Jadumani holding a shallow golden dish, which emits a gentle flickering light. Jadumani walks forward (01:45) followed by the singers, whose hands are held in *namaskar* position: palms together at chest height on the centre line of the body with elbows out to the side. Dinanath and Basanta exit, as the singers spread out across the stage behind Jadumani (01:52). They continue to sing Sanskrit verses as Jadumani, also singing, squats slowly into a deep *plié* at the front of the stage area with his knees turned outwards (02:20); he places three artificial tealights on the *agnigarh* (02:26) and the dish on the ground beneath it (02:42).



Figure 20: 'Lighting the lamps' on the agnigarh

1.2 *mati akhara*¹² sequence

Jadumani then bows towards the *agnigarh*, with hands in *namaskar* position (02:44) before rising (02:49). He steps back and stops singing (02:58). Niranjan improvises a faster melody in the higher register on the *bahi*, and the singers remain silent as Jadumani performs the following positions:

1.2.1 Performs two slow full pliés with knees pointing outwards and hands in *namaskar*; this combination is called *orat baha-utha*. (02:59; Figure 21)

1.2.2 Rises into a $\frac{3}{4}$ standing position with feet and knees turned outwards and brings both arms apart and outwards horizontal to the floor, with palms upwards and turned outwards; the final stance is called *purush ora* (03:23; Figure 22: *purush ora* position). At this point, the chorus resume singing.

1.2.3 Bends back to touch ground with right hand facing stage left. This movement is known as *gerowa sowa* (03:32; Figure 23)

¹² *Mati akhara* was discussed in Chapter Five, p. 208.

1.2.4 Performs a front-facing half pli  holding hands perpendicular to each other, the right hand upwards with palm facing the audience, the left horizontal to the floor with palm facing downwards; this is sometimes referred to as *hordenko* hand position (03:40; Figure 24).

1.2.5 Repeats *Gerowa sowa*, this time touching ground with left hand facing stage right (03:46)

1.2.6 Performs half pli  with hands in *hordenko* position (03:56; Figure 24)

1.2.7 *Purush ora* (04:02; Figure 22)

1.2.8 Two slow leg lifts which twist the upper body. The dancer stamps with his left foot, and then lifts the right, crossing it in front of the left leg and holding it at knee-height. As he does this, both arms swing to the right, slightly curved and with palms facing right. He then repeats the same sequence in the opposite direction, starting by stamping his right foot; this movement is called *har bhanga* (04:06; Figure 25)

1.2.9 Full body inversion with chin and hands on the ground, elbows folded; legs are together and straight pointing upwards at 90  to the ground; this combination is known as *morai pani khowa* (peacock drinking water) (04:19; Figure 26)

1.2.10 Full body inversion is sustained and the legs are crossed in lotus position; this combination is known as *kachoi pani khowa* (tortoise drinking water) (04:51; Figure 27)

1.2.11 *Purush ora* (05:09; Figure 22)



Figure 21: orat baha-utha movement



Figure 22: purush ora position



Figure 23: gerowa sowa position



Figure 24: hordenko hand position



Figure 25: har bhanga spine twist with lifted leg



Figure 26: morai pani khowa position



Figure 27: kachoy pani khowa position

Concluding the final *purush ora*, Jadumani then brings his hands together in the *namaskar* gesture (05:16) and the artists fall in line behind him as he walks to exit stage

right (05:20); the other five artists continue stage left and sit on the white sheet set up with microphones (05:36). They take up their instruments, continuing to sing *Deepa jyoti* to Melody 1 (06:02; Figure 28). Dipendra exchanges his *sarinda* for a violin.



Figure 28: The Musicians(Left to right) Nitul on Khol, Govinda on bhortal and vocals, Boloram on vocals, Dipendra on sarinda (in the process of exchanging it for a violin) and Niranjana on basuri (06:02)

Item 2: *Vandana* (06:26 – 19:25)

“Item 2: Vandana (20-minute prelude part 2)

Bhabananda Barbayan and Mukunda Saikia – Dancers

Nitul Bora – Khol

Boloram Saikia – Vocals

Niranjana Saikia – Flute

Dipendra Sarma – Violin

Gobinda Kalita Bayan – Cymbals

Guru Vandana forms the second part of the prelude. Here, the dance duo invoke the guru—the founder fathers of Assamese Vaishnavism—then the audience, and then the Lord, whose beauty and divinity are described and celebrated through abhinaya and pure dance.

Abhinaya, the art of using mime and facial expression, will be used to visually interpret two songs.¹³ The first, which describes Krishna’s physical beauty, is from Kaliya Daman, a musical play by Sankaradeva about Krishna subduing the snake demon Kaliya. The second is a Sanskrit hymn known as

¹³ The word *abhinaya* comes from the *natyashastra*, an ancient treatise on Indian dramaturgy. Though in the *natyashastra* and in contemporary Indian Classical dance discourse *abhinaya* can refer to drama, make-up, costume etc; it is used in relation to Sattriya arts in the narrower sense of a form of mimetic dance which includes *hastas* (meaningful hand gestures), bodily actions and facial expressions to interpret words from a song literally and metaphorically. The use of *abhinaya* in Sattriya dance was explored in Chapter Five.

totaya, which Sankaradeva composed and sang extempore at his first meeting with King Naranarayana. The first of Sankaradeva's literary creations, this hymn references episodes from Krishna's life. Both the songs are in Mahur raag (scale), to Thukani and Suta taal (rhythmic cycle). The dance is based on sutradhari¹⁴ and jhumura¹⁵ dances, frequently performed in the monasteries of Assam."

According to our British Museum description, the Vandana contains two songs, but in fact it is structured around three:

2.1 'Megha Syamala' (06:31 – 11:44).

The first song, taken from the play *Kaliya Daman* by Sankaradeva¹⁶, is also known by the first two words of the song: *megha syamala*, meaning 'dark cloud'. To those familiar with Hindu conventions, the phrase immediately conjures up Lord Krishna, the playful incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who is often depicted in poetry, dance and art as dark-skinned—often black or blue. In complete contrast to their significance in western literature,¹⁷ dark clouds in Asia portend rain and the monsoon – a sign of joy, and relief after the hot summer months. The song describes the attributes and beauty of the Lord.

2.2 'Mdhudanava Darana' (11:52 – 17:58).

The second song is referred to in the programme notes as '*totoya*', a technical term which refers to a poem or song with twelve syllables per line.¹⁸ The song is also commonly referred to using the first two words of the song: *mdhudanava darana*. These verses, in Sanskrit, are said to have been composed 'on the spot' by Sankaradeva during

¹⁴ *Sutradhari nach* is the style of 'pure dance'—i.e. it contains no mimesis—performed by the *sutradhar*, the narrator figure in the Assamese Vaishnavite dance-dramas known as *bhaona*.

¹⁵ *Jhumura* is also a non-mimetic dance style, performed in the monastery by small groups of young monks. This form and its reconfiguration as Item 2: *Vandana* which was discussed explored in Chapter Five, p.208.

¹⁶ It is also sung in devotional contexts independent of the play

¹⁷ For example, 'Oh such was the fate of poor Flora Macneil! In the morn of her days none so happy as she;/ All was joy—all was gaiety, sun-shine and brightness—/And her hours were all mirth and all revelry./ No thick cloud of blackness was seen in the distance—/Forboding the wild wasting pitiless blast' (anon 1819).

¹⁸ I am grateful to David Buchta, Lecturer in Sanskrit at Brown University, Providence for bringing my attention to the formal properties of this poem and where it differs from classical Sanskrit in an email on 28th August 2018.

his first visit to the Cooch King Naranarayan.¹⁹ The poet-saint recited the verses as he entered the palace court, causing the King to rise up from his throne to hear the divine voice of Sankaradeva and witness his extraordinary personality. The King then welcomed Sankaradeva and offered him a chair close to him despite the fact the latter was in the court because he was on trial.

2.3 ‘Kripanga Upanga’ (18:00 – 19:20).

The third song, not mentioned in the programme notes, is *kripanga upanga* is a *sloka nach*.²⁰

Here again, my notation represents the abstracted basic melody without ornaments, which subtly vary on each iteration. It is offered as a framework which will help to describe the dance movements.

2.1 ‘Megha Syamala’ (06:31 – 11:44)

The section structured around ‘Megha Syamala’ is made up of three parts. In the first section (2.1.1, starting at 06:31) there is only instrumental accompaniment: flute, violin, *bhortal* and *khol*. The dancers enter the stage and then perform a one-minute non-mimetic dance. The second section (2.1.2, starting at 07:31) and third section (2.1.3, starting at 08:45), are accompanied by Boloram Saikia singing ‘Megha Syamala’. In 2.1.2, he sings the first five lines without a fixed *tāl* or pulse. The dancers interpret the words through mimetic and metaphorical gestures known technically as *abhinaya*. Their movements are slow and reverent. In 2.1.3, Boloram sings all eight lines to a rhythm,

¹⁹ This originating story was told to me by Bhabananda during our Paris interview in 2017 (see p. 119) and it matches various sources, including the website ‘A Tribute to Sankaradeva’ where the unnamed editor makes the observation that in this poem is ‘known as *totaya*’ and ‘[t]he first word of each line begins with a character-sequence from the last word of the line preceding it, eg. the first line ends with *vara* and the second line begins with *vara* and so on. Again, in each couplet, the last words of the two lines invariably rhyme with each other, eg. *vara* with *dhara*, *para* with *kara*, *bhaga* with *yuga* and so on’. (A Tribute to Sankaradeva 2018)

²⁰ See footnote 5

and the movements of the dancers are more energetic and joyous. In this section, not all movements are mimetic: some sequences of ‘pure-dance’ are included.

For the purposes of analysis, I have divided the song into the following eight ‘lines’ suggested by the phrasing of the music and dance.

‘Line 1’ - *megha syamala murtimayata mahabahung*

‘Line 2’ - *mahorasasthalong*

‘Line 3’ - *aaraktayata kanjalochanayugang*

‘Line 4’ - *pitambarasundaram*

‘Line 5’ - *muktahitaka hemahara balayalongkara*

‘Line 6’ - *kantidhyutim*

‘Line 7’ - *Krishna sarada chanda chandra sadrisang*

‘Line 8’ – *hridipangkaje hahambhaje*



2.1.1 - Entrance and opening dance (instrumental accompaniment only)

As they appear at the stage entrance (06:31), Bhabananda and Mukunda crouch and touch the ground in a gesture of respect to the stage; the *khol*²¹ and *bhortāl*²² introduce *sut kola tāla*. They make the *namaskar* gesture, rise (06:34) and begin to dance as the musicians start to play (06:38). Phrase 1, Melody 2 (first time) The dancers make their way slowly and diagonally to centre stage. On the first cycle of seven beats (06:38) they take two graceful steps. On the second cycle, (06:41) they make a 1/2 counter-clockwise turn with arms held wide apart and hands in *pataka hasta* (flat palm with fingers together, only thumb slightly bent) and strike a pose with their back to the audience (Figure 29).



Figure 29: Vandana: Pose during entrance (06:42)

On the third cycle (06:44) they start a 1½ counter-clockwise turn, with arms spread wide, and on the fourth cycle (06:47) they finish the turn in the positions shown in Figure 30, with Bhabananda in a basic position of *Sattriya*/ *sattriya* known as the ‘male’

²¹ A *khol* is a two-faced drum made of wood or clay (in UKS and in the performance described here, only wooden *khol* are used) ubiquitous in Assam, Bengal, Manipur and Orissa. See Figure 21 and Barthakur 2003: 89.

²² The *bhortāl* is a ‘large kind of cymbal, made of bronze or brass metal with wide thin flat *Pāt* (rim) but with a large *Betu* (boss). Diameter of the ‘*Pāt*’ i.e. circular disks of this instrument is usually anywhere between 40–60cm and diameter of the lower part of the ‘*Betu*’ is about 30–40cm. This type of large size rhythmic solid instrument is rare in other parts of India [beyond the Northeast]. *Bhortāl* or *Bartāl* is used in *Nām-Kīrtan*, *Pūjā-Archanam Gāyan-Bāyan* with *Khol*, *Dhuliya-Bhawara* etc.’ (Barthakur 2003: 104–5).

stance called *purush ora* and Mukunda in a variation of the basic ‘female’ stance, the *prakriti ora*, with the hands and arms in the *hordenko hasta* (as Figure 30)

For Phrase 1, Melody 2 (second time, from 06:50), the dancers repeat the same sequence as above, ending centre stage at 07:00)



Figure 30: *purush* and *prakriti ora* stances. Bhabananda (left) in *purush ora* and Mukunda (right) in a variation of *prakriti ora* with *hordenko hasta*. This position is taken at 6:47, 07:00, 07:26, 10:11, 12:40, 13:08.

Phrase 2, Melody 2 - The duo then perform a sequence of ‘pure dance’ for eight cycles of seven, at the same time as Phrase 2, Melody 2 is repeated twice. It is an original non-mimetic composition by Bhabananda which uses dance vocabulary from *jhumura* dance.²³ The first time this phrase is played (from 07:02), the dancers gesture and move first to the left and then to the right (as Figure 31) before spiralling the hands in front of the body in a movement known in UKS as *hat mojura*²⁴ and into a *namaskar* position. Then they do the same movements as the first repetition of this phrase, except they move right first and then left.

Phrase 2, Melody 2 (second time): The second time it is played (from 07:13) the dancers make a right-left-right movement with their hands and then left-right-left, followed by a counter-clockwise turn (07:24) ending in the position in Figure 30.

²³ See fn. 15

²⁴ The wrists are held close together, with the hands and fingers fanning out from the centre. The hands then rotate around a centre point between the wrists.

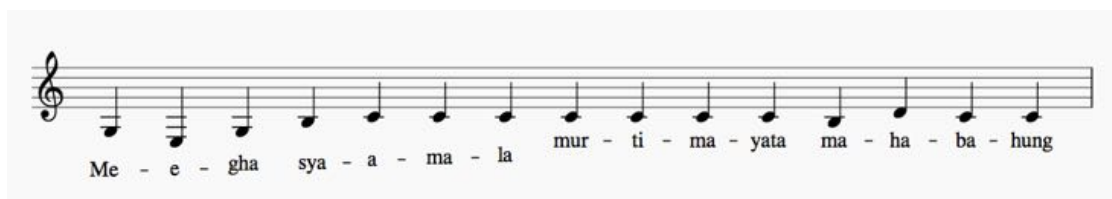


Figure 31: Position during Phrase 2, Melody 2 – part of a ‘pure dance’ composition by Bhabananda

2.1.2 – Accompanied by singing (without pulse)

2.1.2 – Line 1

Boloram sings line 1 (07:31) to the following melody, with no *tāl*:



Melody 2a

‘You are the blue-coloured man, like the blue shining through a cloudy sky

You have a sweet appearance and a muscular beauty’²⁵

²⁵ Translation by Bhabananda Barbayan

On the word ‘*megha*’, meaning ‘cloud’, the dancers turn counter-clockwise (07:31) with their arms swirling around their heads to indicate clouds. This turn is known as *prakriti pak* (see Chapter Three, p. 100 for a description of this turn). At ‘*syamala*’ ‘the blue-coloured man’ (07:36) the dancers circle their right hand over the left, indicating the coloured skin. At ‘*murti-mayata*’ (07:42) they ‘draw’ in the air with their right hand, indicating the perfectly formed beauty of the lord, and at ‘*mahabahung*’ (07:45) they clench their fists and make a posture of strength (Figure 32)



Figure 32: Embodying Krishna's strength

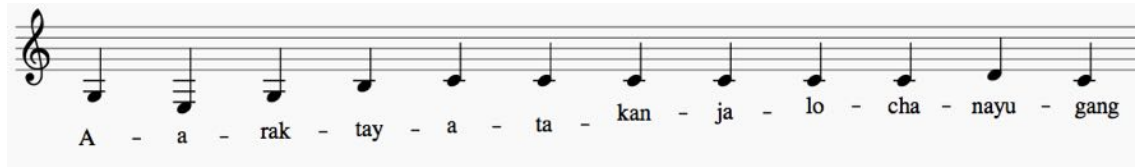
2.1.2 – Line 2

Boloram sings Line 2 (07:52) ‘*mahorasasthalong*’ meaning ‘with sweet appearance’, to phrase 3, Melody 2. As he does so, the dancers-facing the audience-outline with their hands the beautiful ornamentation and garlands of flowers worn by Lord Krishna. This gesture is followed by a pure dance move (07:58) in which the dancers make a lotus gesture towards stage left (this hand shape is often known as *alapadma hasta*) and then bring their hands, in *hordenko* position and facing downwards, back in towards the navel.

2.1.2 – Line 3

Boloram sings Line 3 (08:06) ‘*Aaraktayata*’ meaning ‘Lips that are bright like the red lotus.’ During this line, the dancers indicate the colour ‘red’ by miming the mixing of pigment in their left palm with the fingertips of their right hand. For ‘*kanjalochanayugang*’ (08:10), ‘eyes the shape of a lotus bud’, they indicate the eyes

with the left hand and the 'lotus' gesture or '*alapadma*' with the left hand (as Figure 33). The line is sung to the following melody:



Melody 2b

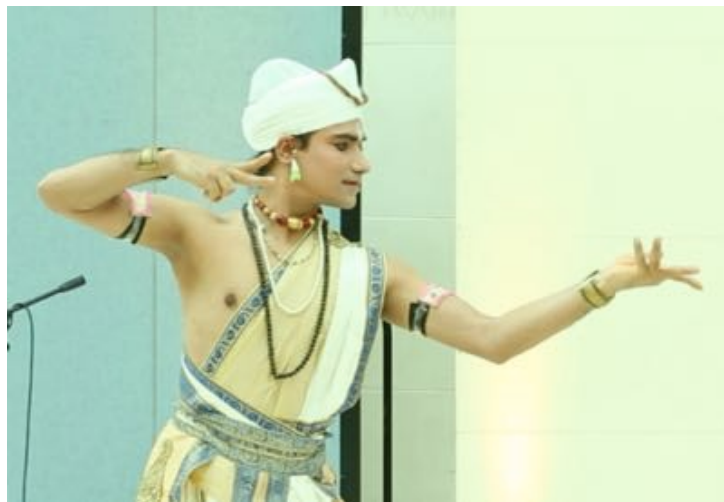
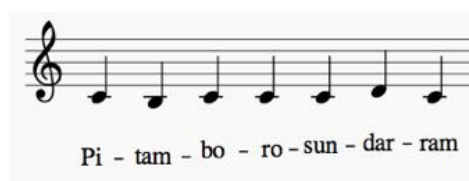


Figure 33: Krishna's lotus eyes (first interpretation – with alapadma hasta in the left hand)

2.1.2 – Line 4

Boloram sings Line 4. As he sings '*pitambara*' (08:19) meaning 'wearing yellow clothes', the dancers indicate cloth flowing around their legs. At '*sundaram*' (08:24) meaning beautiful, the dancers stretch out with their right hands and trace a beautiful shape just as during 2.1.2 – Line 1. This line is sung to the following melody:



Melody 2c

2.1.2 – Line 5

Boloram sings Line 5 (08:30) to Melody 2, Phrase 3: with ‘*muktahitaka hemahara balayalongkara*’ meaning ‘Pearls, diamonds and gold adorn you’, the dancers make a counter-clockwise turn, hands above their head (08:31) then trace a beautiful figure in the air in front of them with both hands (08:35). They follow this (at 08:40) with the same one-handed gesture depicting ‘beauty’ as described in 2.1.2- Line 1.

2.1.3 – Accompanied by singing (with pulse)

2.1.3 – Line 1

Boloram sings Line 1 twice more (once at 08:46 and again at 08:49), accompanied now by the *khol*. This time he sings in *sut kola tāl* to Phrase 1 of Melody 2. During these two repetitions, the dancers interpret the line using largely the same gestures as in 2.1.2 – Line 1 but with slight variations. For example they mime ‘clouds’ by tracing two arcs with their hands turned inwards (as Figure 34) *without* turning the body and instead stepping to stage left whilst turning the head from right to left, and the inverse on the next repetition. These different interpretations of the same line are summarised in Table 1, below.



Figure 34: Tracing an arc on 'Megha' (Line 1)

Table 1: Different interpretations of 'Megha' – 'cloud'

First iteration (free rhythm) of the word 'megha'	First repetition (in tāl)	Second repetition (in tāl)
Hands: dancers show 'clouds' with hands swirling above the head, known as <i>prakriti pak</i>	Hands: dancers show 'clouds' by drawing two arcs above the head as in Figure 34	Hands: dancers show 'clouds' with hands drawing to arcs above the head as in Figure 34
Body: counter-clockwise turn known as <i>prakriti pak</i>	Body: step to stage left whilst turning the head from right to left	Body: step to stage right whilst turning the head from left to right

2.1.3 – Line 2

Boloram then sings line 2 in *tāl* twice to Phrase 3 Melody 2 (from 09:11). On the first repetition (starting 09:11) the dancers repeat the same movements as in the earlier unaccompanied rendering of this line (i.e. 2.1.2 – Line 2) but more briskly and with two variations. Firstly, here the 'headdress' gesture is accompanied by a full counter-

clockwise turn (rather than simply facing the audience). Secondly, the *alapadma-to-hordenko* hand turn is repeated twice (09:17 and 09:19), (rather than once). On the second repetition of Line 2 (09:23), the interpretation is completely new: instead of gesturing Krishna's headdress and maintaining the parallel position of the first two repetitions, the dancers move into a tableau position, with Bhabananda behind and above Mukunda (09:33; see Figure 35).



Figure 35: Devotional tableau

2.1.3 – Line 3

Line 3 is then also repeated twice to Phrase 4, Melody 2. On the first repetition (09:33), the word '*Aaraktayata*' is again interpreted by rubbing together the fingers of each hand, as if mixing a pigment which will be applied as makeup, but this time, the dancers make a counter-clockwise turn as they do so. The word '*kanjalochanayugang*' 'lotus-eyed' is depicted using the two-fingered gesture as in 2.2.1 - Line 3 (08:10; Figure 33), with forefinger and middle finger spread by the right eye and *alapadma*. In this repetition, however, the dancers sink to the ground in a full plié with the left leg stretched out towards stage left. (09:43). In the second repetition of the line (starting 09:45), '*Aaraktayata*' is interpreted using the same 'pigment-mixing' gesture, but without the turn. '*Kanjalochochanayugang*' is then interpreted as in Figure 36 with the right hand, pulled back beside the dancer's cheek, little finger extended.



Figure 36: Krishna's Lotus eyes (second interpretation)

2.1.3 – Line 4

Line 4 is sung twice to the first half of Phrase 1, Melody 2. In contrast to the interpretation of this line in the un-metered version (2.1.2 – Line 4), this time the dancers perform ‘pure dance’ – i.e. their movements are not related to the content of the song. At the first repetition of this line (09:56), as the singer says ‘*pitambarasundaram*’ the dancers, facing the audience, step towards the right with the right hand extended forwards and the left hand extended backwards. Both hands are in *hordenko hasta* (Figure 24). Then they do the same towards the right (09:59). On the second repetition of Line 4 - ‘*pitambarasundaram*’ (10:02), they repeat the same sequence towards the back of the stage but, on this occasion, with both hands facing the direction of movement.

The first half of Phrase 1, Melody 2 is then repeated by the musicians, as the dancers make two counter-clockwise turns, and then a return to the *purush ora/ prakriti ora* pair shown in Figure 30 (10:11).

2.1.3 – Line 5

Line 5 (‘*muktahitaka hemahara balayalongkara*’) is repeated twice to Phrase 1, Melody 2. On the first iteration of ‘*muktahitaka*’ (10:12), the dancers move first to the right and then to the left, with both hands in *alapadma*. This is the only ‘pure dance’ move; the following are all mimetic. At ‘*hemahara*’ they mime putting on earrings (10:16), and at *balayalongkara* (10:19), they mime the wearing of bangles and ornaments. The line is

repeated (10:24): at '*muktahitaka hemahara*' the dancers repeat two different gestures which represent 'preparing pigment for application as make-up' gesture (as in all iterations of Line 3) and at '*balayalongkara*' (10:29) they indicate flowing lower garments (as 2.1.2 - Line 4; 08:19). They finish the phrase by turning to the back of the stage with a pure dance move, in which both dancers hold the right hand at chest height, and the left hand curved above the head (10:33, as Figure 31).

2.1.3 – Line 6

Line 6 ('*kantidhyutim*') is repeated twice to Phrase 3, Melody 2. On the first repetition (10:35), for two cycles of seven, the two dancers make a $\frac{1}{2}$ counter-clockwise turn to face the audience, while tracing a line with the hands around the back of the head and to the front, in a gesture suggestive of the beautiful ornamentation of the Lord. For the next two cycles of seven, they make two leaps to the right, whilst still facing the audience, tracing circles in front of the body with their hands. Until this point, all the movements have been parallel but in the last cycle of seven for this verse (10:42), they dance the last movements – shown in Figure 37 and Figure 38- symmetrically.



Figure 37: Symmetrical position



Figure 38: Symmetrical movement

On the second repetition of Line 6 to Phrase 3, Melody 2 (10:46) the dancers, back in parallel motion, make a series of gestures which, according to Bhabananda, represent the shining dazzling, aura of the Lord flowing to the earth and then spreading to the universe. The Lord is represented by the left hand stretched out towards the left in *alapadma* raised to the sky. The right hand – in *tripatāka* (flat palm with slightly lowered ‘ring’ finger) spirals from the left hand across the body and down towards the earth, as if ‘transmitting’ the Lords aura. This is followed by a slow counter-clockwise turn with hands raised in the air (still in *tripatāka*).



Figure 39: Bhabananda in 'Krishna' pose: both hands in *sasaka hasta*

2.1.3 – Line 7 (*krishna sarada chanda chandra sadrisang*, from 10:56) is repeated twice to Phrase 4, Melody 2. In this line, the poet compares Krishna’s beauty to the outer glow around the moon in the autumn season. During the first cycle of seven beats (10:56), the dancers move into a non-parallel position like Figure 38 except that Bhabananda takes the iconic ‘Krishna’ position (as Figure 39), with both hands in *sasaka hasta* (literally ‘rabbit’ hasta, because the small finger and digit fingers look like

the raised ears of a rabbit) as if playing a flute, and the right foot placed in front of the body, heel down and toes raised. In the second cycle (from 11:00) the dancers depict a crescent moon with their left hands in *ardhacandra hasta* facing stage right and their left hand in *simhamukhah* (Figure 40). The left hand is held in that position for two cycles, as the left hand spirals from the ‘moon’ to the world behind the dancers (11:03). On the second repetition of Line 7 (11:07) the dancers move towards stage left, and depict a full moon with both hands in *ardhacandra hasta* (Figure 41), before repeating the ‘moon to the ground’ gesture used in the first repetition (11:14) whilst travelling across to stage left.

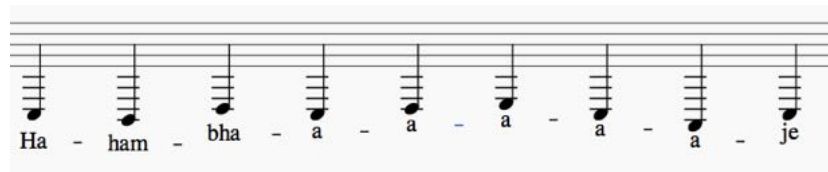


Figure 40: The crescent moon (first time)



Figure 41: Full moon (second time)

2.1.3 – Line 8 (*‘hridipangkaje hahambhaje’*) is repeated twice during Phrase 5, Melody 2 – a phrase made up of six cycles of seven. In the first cycle (11:19), the dancers, facing the front, spiral their hands in *hat mojura* and then make a ‘closed lotus’ shape with their two hands, which, in the second cycle (11:22) moves into the *namaskar* position with *‘hahambhaje’*. In the third cycle (11:24), the dancers cross their arms at the chest in gentle self-embrace for *‘hridipangkaje’* and in the fourth cycle (11:27) spiral their hands in *hat mojura* into *namaskar* position for *‘hahambhaje’*. During the fifth and sixth cycles-only instrumental-(starting 11:30) the dancers make as if to take a flower from the palm of the left hand, which they place in front of the *guru asana* (see Chapter Three) as an ‘offering’ to God (11:35) accompanied by a prolonged final note on the flute. The percussion stops here as the singer repeats *‘hahambhaje’* (from 11:37) without accompaniment, to Melody 2d as the dancers slowly rise, spiralling their hands in *hat mojura* into *namaskar* position in a half plié.



Melody 2d

2.2 Mdhudanava Darana (11:52 – 17:58)

Bhabananda has selected lines from five out of the nine verses of this song: he uses all of Verses 1 and 2; the second half of Verse 3, the first half of Verse 5 and all of Verse 9. In the description which follows, I will provide move-by-move descriptions for the danced interpretations of Verses 1 and 2 (from 11:52 – 15:08) and only the structure of the remainder of dance. In my western stave notation (Melody 2, as Melody 1 above) I have abstracted a basic melodic line out of a far more elaborate and varied musical performance, simply as a framework around which to organise the description of the dance. As well as the musical structure, I have also foregrounded the divisions between *abhinaya* (mimed dance), and ‘pure dance’ – (non-mimetic dance) which are not always contingent on the music. As a general rule, sung phrases are accompanied by *abhinaya* and instrumental sections by ‘pure dance’, but this is not always the case (as at 15:14). It is always the case that musical phrases contain only *abhinaya* or ‘pure dance’, and not

both – i.e. a change between mimetic and non-mimetic dance is always accompanied by a change of musical phrase. The close description afforded to Verses 1 and 2, coupled with the identification of musical phrasing, and changes between mimetic and non-mimetic dance for the remainder of the song provide ample illustrations for my analysis in Chapter Five, which shows how Bhabananda has re-shaped ‘traditional’ repertoire and introduced new elements to create *Vrindavani Paal*.



Melody 3: Mdhudanava Darana (also known as 'Totaya')

Even as Boloram is still singing the last note of the previous song the violin starts to play Phase 1 of Melody 3, slowly and in free rhythm unaccompanied by percussion (11:45). The dancers gesture from their mouths to the audience, in a move which Bhabananda explained means ‘now we’ll speak more of Krishna’s beauty’ (11:47).

2.2.1 – Verse 1 (11:50 – 13:08)

madhu-dānava-dāraṇa-deva-varam:

varavārija-locana cakṛa-dharam

dharani-dhara-dhārana dheya param:

paramārtha vidāsubha nāsakaram

Annihilator of the demon Madhu and the Supreme of gods.

With eyes like choice lotuses

Bearer of discus, holder of mountain,

Remover of all the ominous elements from the path of pursuit of spiritual
knowledge

madhu-dānava-dārana-deva-varam (sung to the first half of Phrase 2): During this first line the dancers mime the action of Krishna slaying Madhu with his bare hands (11:52), make a counter-clockwise turn and then (at 11:55) create the same two-levelled tableau as in Figure 35 (also formed at 09:33), with Mukunda standing above and behind Bhabananda, in full plié.

varavārija-locana cakra-dharam (to the second half of Phrase 2): The dancers remain in a two-tiered tableau, and move into two different postures: Bhabananda, in his full plié, shows the lotus flower (11:57), and then gestures towards his eyes, whilst Mukunda takes up the side-facing position showing ‘eyes like a lotus’ as in Figure 33. They then move into the position in Figure 42 – where Bhabananda plays the role of Vishnu sleeping under the protection of a hooded cobra, played by Mukunda (12:00). They hold this position as the musicians play Phrase 3.

dharani-dhara-dhārana dheya param (to Phrase 4): This line is sung twice. On the first iteration, the dancers move right whilst rotating the hands above to the sides of the head in a ‘pure dance’ movement like the *mati akhara* known as *sanmukholoi chata*²⁶ (12:09). They then gesture from the head to the audience with both hands, in gesture describing ‘spiritual knowledge’ (12:11) As the line is repeated the dancers make a movement which signifies Krishna lifting mount Govardhan with one finger to save the citizens from Indra’s wrath (Figure 43; 12:13), followed by a *hasta* which represents Kurma the tortoise – an avatar of Vishnu who lifted up Mount Mandara (Figure 44;

²⁶ As demonstrated in this online Sattriya tutorial: <https://youtu.be/yPUAECxzUNI?t=370>

12:17). The musicians play Phrase 5 as the dancers – hands held like ‘tusks’ - depict Varaha the boar, an incarnation of Vishnu, who lifts the earth from the seas: Figure 45; 12:19).

paramārtha vidāsubha nāsakaram (to Phrase 6): This line is also sung twice. On the first iteration (12:24), the dancers mime writing, and then (at 12:28) gesture from their heads to the audience in a similar gesture to 12:11. On the second repetition, the dancers seem to ‘wash’ their hands (12:30) and then make a ‘pure’ dance move, in which hands and feet are thrown toward the left (12:32) followed by a swift counter-clockwise turn (12:33) and then hands and feet are thrown towards the right (12:34).



Figure 42: Tableau representing Vishnu sleeping under the protection of a hooded snake²⁷

²⁷ The snake is Shesha – the king of all the *nāgas* (deities in the form of cobras) who, according to some *puranas* took the form of Ram’s brother Lakshman and Krishna’s brother Balorama, his duty being always to serve Vishnu and his avatars. (Flood 1996: 151).



Figure 43: Krishna lifts mount Govardhan on one finger



Figure 44: Kurma the tortoise incarnation of Vishnu



Figure 45: Varaha, the boar incarnation of Vishnu

The musicians repeat Phrase 6 another five times. On the first of these instrumental-only iterations, the dancers perform a sedate counter-clockwise turn (12:38) which takes them into the positions shown in Figure 30 (12:40). The following 4 iterations of Phrase 6 accompany an unmodified excerpt from the mela section of a *jhumura* (a different section from that performed at 2.1.1; 7:15) also in *ektāl*. During the second iteration

(from 12:40) the dancers, facing the audience, perform an *alapadma-to-hordenko* movement towards the right (as at 07:58, 09:17 and 09:19), then in front of the body, at waist height as they travel one leap to the right, and then a third *alapadma-to-hordenko* movement towards the left. They then make a 360° counter-clockwise turn with both hands held at waist height, palms facing upwards and perpendicular to the body. On the third iteration (from 12:46) they repeat the same sequence again, this time starting on the left and finishing on a 180° turn leaving them facing the back. For the fourth (12:51) and fifth (12:57) iterations, they repeat the same movements as the second and third, this time facing the back of the stage. Then Phrase 7 is played (an ‘ending’ variation of Phrase 6) at 13:02 as the dancers face the audience and perform *alapadma-to-hordenko* – first to the right and then to the left before leaping away from one another (13:05) and then turning in towards each other (13:06) with the same turn as at 06:41, with arms out-stretched and hands in *pataka hasta*. The dancers then take the *purush/prakriti ora* stance (13:08) as in Figure 30.

2.2.2 – Verse 2 (13:09 – 15:07)

kara-curnita cedipa bhuri bhagam:

bhaga-bhusana-korcita-pādayugam

yuganāyaka-nāgara-vesarucim:

rucirāmsupidhāna sarira sucim

Destroyer of Sisupala²⁸, Your feet are worshipped by Siva, the bearer of the symbol of crescent moon on his forehead.

O God, you are fond of adorning your physique with beautiful attire

a) *Abhinaya* section

kara-curnita cedipa bhuri bhagam is sung to Phrase 4. The dancers move diagonally towards the front left corner of the performance area, (13:09); they mime as if to shoot

²⁸ The king of Chidikindom; Krishna’s ‘evil-minded cousin’ (as per personal correspondence with Bhabananda 4th March, 2017.)

three arrows as they advance. The left hand, which holds the ‘bow’ is in *sikhara hasta* (hand in fist with thumb raised, see Figure 46). As each arrow is ‘shot’, the *bhortal* is struck dramatically. The musicians then play Phrase 5 (from 13:16) and the dancers make a broad counter-clockwise circle, spreading their arms wide as they move (in *sari pak*), the left hand still in *sikhara hasta*.



Figure 46: Krishna kills his cousin Sisupala

bhaga-bhusana-korcita-pādayugam is sung twice, each time to Phrase 6. The first time (13:20), the dancers mime putting on earrings on the right and then the left ear, and then gesture with the right hand from the lips to the left hand. On the second iteration of this line (13:26) they mime putting on bangles, first on the right wrist, and then on the left, and then they move towards the audiences whilst ‘holding’ something precious in their cupped hands.

b) ‘Pure dance’ section

The musicians then repeat Phrase 6 five times. During the first repetition (from 13:31), the dancers move forward and ‘place’ the precious item on the ground (13:36) while making a half plié and bending towards the ground. In the second repetition (from 13:37) they step on the left foot and raise the right whilst spiralling the hands in *hat mojura*, and then make a ‘grapevine’-like sequence (one step to the right with the right foot, the left foot crosses behind the right, another step to the right with the right foot) at the end of which they repeat *hat mojura* this time whilst lifting the left foot. On the third repetition (from 13:42) they perform a similar sequence facing diagonally away from the audience to the back right corner of the stage. This time, the feet move in double

time, and the hands maintain the *hat mojura* movement throughout the movement. On the fourth repetition (from 13:47), they do the same foot movements as the first and second times, this time towards the back of the stage and with the arms opening out in an arc, with the fingers spread. On the fifth repetition (13:52) they face the audience again, repeat the same movements diagonally towards the front left corner of the stage.

The musicians then play Phrase 2 twice. On the first repetition (from 13:56), the dancers perform the same sequence of dance movements as at 07:58 (except at twice the speed): hands in *hordenko* position and facing downwards at the navel, to hands in *alapadma* to the left, then back in *hordenko* to the centre, then *alapadma* to the right. Then they make a counter-clockwise turn (at 14:00) and, facing the audience, cross the hands at the wrist, quivering the hands to the right, left and right again. They then drop into a full plié (14:06) as in *baha chata*²⁹. On the second repetition, Phrase 2 (from 14:08) is played with a slight variation (the first six notes are played twice). The dancers perform another *baha chata* plié and then make a half counter-clockwise turn to face the back of the stage and then follow this with a repeat of the movements performed on the first repetition of Phrase 2 (so 13:56 – 14:07 is exactly the same as 14:08 – 14:19).

The musicians then play Phrase 7, which is a variation of Phrase 6, as the dancers make a counter-clockwise turn to face the audience (14:22) and then repeat the *hordenko-alapadma-hordenko-alapadma* sequence (as described above, during Phrase 2) followed by a wide clockwise turn ending in *purush ora* (14:29).

c) *abhinaya* Section

yuganāyaka-nāgara-vesarucim is sung to Phrase 4 (from 14:31). The dancers gesture with their right hand, the forefinger and middle finger extended towards the audience in a gesture which indicates someone managing or ordering people (the left hand is in *hamsasya*) followed by a full counter-clockwise turn ending in *purush ora*. The musicians then play Phrase 5 (14:35) as the dancers hold out the left hand towards stage left in *alapadma hasta* which the right hand is held at shoulder height with the forefinger circling twice.

²⁹ See this demonstrated on ‘Sattriya Dance Tutorial’ 04:01 <https://youtu.be/yPUAECxzUNI?t=240>



Figure 47: Controller of the four yugas

rucirāmsupidhāna sarira sucim is then sung twice to Phrase 6. On the first repetition (from 14:40), the dancers indicate the beautiful clothes worn by Lord Krishna, with a 90° turn to the right, then to the left, and then to the front, their hands held in *hamsasya* and just below waist height. On the second repetition (from 14:46), hands still in *hamsasya*, they make a full clockwise turn, still indicating the flowing garments of the Lord, followed by tracing an arc in front of the body.

d) Pure dance section

The musicians then play Phrase 6 twice. On the first repetition, the dancers bring their right hand to the front of the body in *hamsasya*, and then throw it back in the *sasaka hasta* (as in Figure 48), and then repeat these two gestures with the left hand whilst making a half counter-clockwise turn towards the back. They then step onto the right foot and lift and bend the left leg behind them, step down into *purush ora*, bring the arms into make a lotus shape at chest level, and then back to *purush ora*. On the second repetition (from 14:56), they repeat the same movements as for the first repetition, starting facing the back and turning towards the audience at 14:58. Then the musicians play Phrase 7 – the ‘ending’ variation of Phrase 6 (as at 14:22) – as the dancers perform the *alapadma-hordenko-alapadma* sequence as during Phrase 2 (the only difference being that on this iteration, the sequence does not start with the *hordenko* position at navel). Then, at 15:04, they make a full counter-clockwise turn ending in *purush ora* at 15:06 (exactly as at 14:29).

2.2.3 – Verse 3 (15:09-15:54) – second half only. (From here onwards, only the bare framework of the performance will be described, without a detailed descriptions of the dancers’ movements.)

hanumanta-harisa-sahāya-ratam:

*ratarānga-parāyana satrunatam*³⁰

Thee with slender waist and a beautiful chin, having Hanuman, the monkey chief as thy friend, you are fond of amorous sports and enemies are submissive to you. You enjoy the cool breeze³¹

The dancers perform *abhinaya* (mimetic movements) to the following:

From 15:09: *hanumanta-harisa-sahāya-ratam* sung once to Phrase 4

From 15:14: the musicians play Phrase 5

From 15:19: *ratarānga-parāyana satrunatam* is sung four times to Phrase 6,

They then perform ‘pure dance’ (non-mimetic movements) to the following:

From 15:39: the musicians play Phrase 2

From 15:48: the musicians play Phrase 1

2.2.4 – Verse 5 (15:54-16:35) – first half only

taruni-mana-mohana-sarva-subham

³⁰ The first two lines of Verse 3 are omitted in the British Museum performance: *suci-cāmara-vāyu-nisevya tanum:/ tanu-madhyaga-deha-suvesa-hanum.*

³¹ Verse 4 is also omitted:

nata bartula sthula sudirgha bhujam:/ bhujā gādhipa talpa sayānamajam/ ajarāmar vighraha-viswa-gurum:/ guru godhana kāmada kalpatarum. ‘Strong-armed one strong arms, who lies on the hood of the serpent. You are the deathless and birthless one, who cares for cows and who can fulfil the desire of devotees like the wish-yeilding tree of heaven’

Charmer of young women; you are the embodiment of all the good qualities, you are engaged for the welfare of all the animate and inanimate. You are wearing garlands of pearls over your indigo-coloured body³³

a) The dancers perform *abhinaya* to the following:

15:54: *taruni-mana-mohana-sarva-subham* sung twice to Phrase 4

16:04: the musicians play Phrase 5

16:09: *subha-mangala-dāyaka-ñila-nibham* sung twice to Phrase 6

16:19: the musicians play Phrase 6 twice (the dancers embody Krishna and a *gopi* respectively during this section: see Figure 48).

b) The last phrase is accompanied by a non-mimetic *jhumura* dance sequence.

16:29: the musicians play Phrase 7

³² The second to lines of Verse 5 are omitted: *ibha kumbaja mauktika mālyavaham: vahalarasa mistaja sarvasaham*. ‘You are the granter of all wishes, you are the abode of all.’

³³ Verses 6, 7 and 8 are also omitted.

Verse 6: *sahajāyate padmalākṣa-cidam:/ cidānanda-vinodana-veda-vidam/ viduṣhāmana-maguna kambu-galam:/ galasobhita kaustabha bhima-balam* ‘Lotus-eyed one, I pray to you the supreme spirit well-versed in the vedas

You always remain immanent in the mind of the learned. Your neck bears the curve of the conch. You wear the garland made of Kaustubha [a rare gem] and you are the strongest of all.’

Verse 7: *balabhadra-sahodara-satya-vapum:/ vapunirdita viswa-surāri-ripum/ ripu yuthapa-yuthapa-darpaharam:/ haramaulinighrishta padābjaparam*. ‘Younger brother of Balabhadra, embodiment of truth. You conquer the entire universe. You are the destroyer of enemies and the pride of their leader. You are worshipped by the great Mahadeva [Siva]

Verse 8: *paraloka-sahāya-sahasra-mukham/ mukharāli kulākula mālya-sukham/ sukha-moksada-dakṣa ramā-ramanam:/ manaso-parimeya-sahasra pranam*

Companion of the next world. You with your one thousand faces are fond of the flowers over which the bee hovers. You are the giver of salvation. You are skilful and beloved of your consort Lakshmi. You can grant more than what is expected



Figure 48: Krishna (left) sporting with a Gopi (right) – note the sasaka hasta: the typical ‘Krishna hands’

2.2.5 – Verse 9 (16:35-18:06)

hari kinkara sankara isapade:

*padamiccana gāyati cāmritade*³⁴

last line x 6

then ‘ending tune’ x 1

then last line without rhythm

O Lord Hari, I pray to you worshipped by Gadura. I pray to you, I bow down before you, I salute you. I, Sankara, the servant of God who desires to lie prostrate at the feet of Lord Hari the grantor of immortality sing in praise of you the above panegyric.

a) *Abhinaya* is performed to the following:

16:36: *hari kinkara sankara isapade, padamiccana gāyati cāmritade* sung twice to Phrase 2

16:58: *hari kinkara sankara isapade* sung twice to Phrase 4

³⁴ The first two lines of Verse 9 are also omitted: *pranatosi natosmi natosmi-harim:/ hari vairi hutāsana bhogya-harim*

17:07: *padamiccana gāyati cāmritade* sung to Phrase 6

b) Pure dance is then performed to the following:

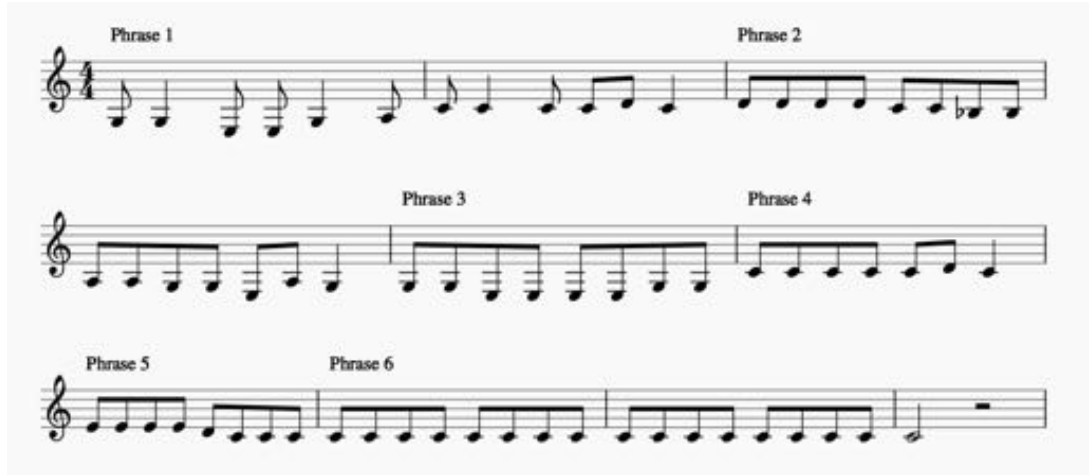
17:12 *padamiccana gāyati cāmritade* sung three times to Phrase 6

17:27 the musicians playing Phrase 7

c) *Abhinaya* is then performed to the following

17:34: *padamiccana gāyati cāmritade* sung very slowly, and without any rhythmic accompaniment.

2.3 ‘Kripanga Upanga’ Sloka Nach (18:00 – 19:20)



kripanga upanga bhupanga bhusitang

bhudharasri dhara dhara dhara dhara dhagitong

aganaga khagadhaga dhaga dhaga dhagitong

gobinda sri pada pada bada ena gada ena chada ena srida ena dhe

2.3.1 - Lines 1 and 2

The first two lines are repeated four times to Phrase 1 and Phrase 2. On the first iteration (from 18:07), the dancers perform non-mimetic, pure dance movements to the audience. The second time (from 18:04) they perform the same sequence towards the back of the stage. Through the third (18:21) and fourth (18:28) repetitions, they incorporate the following *hastas* in quick succession: Krishna lifting a mountain on one finger (as Figure 43; 18:26), Kurma the tortoise (as Figure 44; 18:28) and Varaha the boar (Figure 45; 18:35). On the fourth repetition, the second line of the couplet - ‘Bhudharasri dhara dhara dhara dhara dhagitong’ - is repeated three times to Phrase 2 as the dancers continue to leap around as embodiments of *varaha* the boar incarnation.

2.3.2 - Line 3

aganaga khagadhaga dhaga dhaga dhagitong is sung four times to Phrases 3 and 4. During the first two repetitions of this line (from 18:41), the dancers depict snakes (Figure 49). On the third repetition (from 18:48), they dance with their hands held in a

position which depicts a bird's beak (Figure 50). On the fourth repetition (from 18:51) they use their hands to depict a bird's fluttering wings (Figure 51).

aganaga khagadhaga is then sung twice to Phrase 3, and then *aganaga khagadhaga dhaga dhaga dhagitong* is sung again to Phrases 3 and 4. During this section, the dancers use their whole body to depict a bird in flight as they 'fly' in a small counter-clockwise circle around the stage (Figure 52).

Bhabananda translated this section as: 'Praise to Krishna the merciful, creator of the serpents and the birds' (Paris interview).

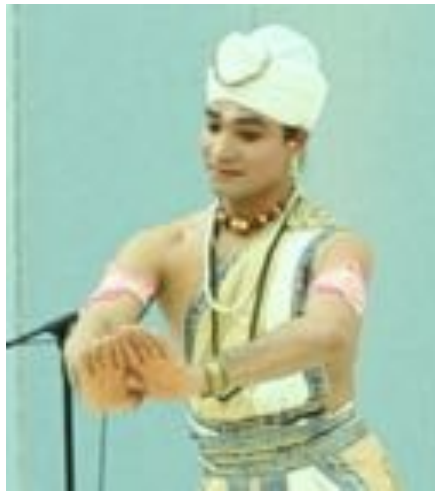


Figure 49: Krishna, creator of the serpents



Figure 50: Bird's beak



Figure 51: Bird's wings



Figure 52: Bird in flight

2.3.3 – Line 4

The fourth and final line is sung in a call and response pattern:

From 19:02 Boloram sings *gobinda sri pada pada* to Phrase 5 as Bhabananda makes a full counter-clockwise turn towards the audience and Mukunda raises his hands above the head and turned outwards in *hordenko hasta*. Then the rest of the musicians respond at 19:03 with *bada ena gada ena chada ena srida ena dhe* to Phrases 5 and 6 as the dancers take the same position as Figure 48: Bhabananda takes the iconic Krishna flute-playing pose with *sasaka hasta* and Mukunda takes a feminine posture and looks toward the 'Lord' with loving devotion (Figure 53) and then both dancers crouch and seem to place something special near to the *agni garh*, as if presenting an offering to the Lord (19:07)



Figure 53: Krishna and loving devotee (19:04)

At 19:07, Boloram sings *gobinda sri pada pada* to Phrase 5 as the dancers start to perform a lively ‘pure dance’ with quick movements. They reach with their right hand, diagonally across the body to the left in *hordonko*, with the right stretched up diagonally and to the right in *alapadma hasta*. Then at 19:09, the rest of the singers respond with *bada ena gada ena chada ena srida ena* to Phrase 6 as the dancers make three counter-clockwise spins, moving towards the back left stage exit. Mukunda spins in the ‘feminine’ *prakriti pak* (Chapter Three, p. 100) and Bhabananda in the ‘masculine’ *purush pak*.

From 19:12, the same sequence is repeated, this time with the dancers facing and moving towards the back right exit, and from 19:17, the same sequence is performed a third time, the only difference being that Boloram sings *gobinda sri pada pada* three times and the dancers exit the stage before the rest of the singers follow with *bada ena gada ena chada ena srida ena dhe*.

Item 3: Vrindavani Paal (19:33 – 44:35)

Item 3: Vrindavani Paal (25-minutes: main dance)

Niranjana Saikia – Oja (lead dancer)

Gobinda Kalita, Naren Baruah, Nitul Bora, Krishna Kumar Saikia and Dinanath Baruah – pāli (cymbal and vocals)

Mukunda Saikia – Garuda (ardent devotee and bird vehicle of Krishna)

Pradip Kumar Neog – Bakasura (Crane demon)

Dinannath Baruah and Krishna Kumar Saikia – Kaliya (Serpent demon)

Bhabanada Barbayan & Naren Baruah – support dancers

Inspiration

This dance was conceived by talented dancer and path-breaking choreographer Bhabananda Barbayan, who took his inspiration from the Vrindavani Vastra, a nine-meter Assamese textile currently on display in Gallery 91 of the British Museum. The tapestry depicts characters and stories held sacred by the monks of Majuli Island, Assam, which they will animate and honour through music, dance and drama.

Style

This dance is performed in the style of Ojapāli, a traditional mode of Assamese musical storytelling containing various elements described in Bharata's ancient performance treatise, the Natyasastra. The 'Oja' or leader will interpret four stories, accompanied by a chorus of 'pāli' singers.

Four stories:

I) Bhakti Pradeep: This first story celebrates the figure of Garuda – the ardent devotee and bird vehicle of Vishnu who has spread his Lord's message through the ages. This dance asks these questions: What is the value of earning knowledge if it is not practised? Is it possible for wisdom to prevail without devotion? By exploring the theme of spreading divine faith, the dance evokes Srimanta Sankaradeva, founder of the Assamese monastic order, who himself worked to establish peace and unity through propagation of the word of Lord Krishna.

II) Saturavingsati Avatara: In this section, we meet the eight avatars of Lord Vishnu depicted in the Vrindavani Vastra. You will meet Matsya the fish incarnation, Kurma the tortoise, Varaha the boar, Vamana the dwarf, Parashurama, the 'hero with the axe', Rama, the hero of the Ramayana epic,

Narasimha, part-man, part-lion, and, of course, the playful flute-playing Krishna, the most significant Vishnu incarnation for Assamese Vaishnavites. Various episodes of Krishna's life are also dramatised: defeating the snake demons Aghasura and Kaliya and the crane demon Bakasura, dancing with the female cowherders or hiding their clothes (these acts are referred to as rasamandala and vastraharan respectively). The cloth and dance also depict Garuda, the ardent devotee and bird vehicle of Lord Vishnu.

III) Bakasura Badha: Kansa, the wicked maternal uncle of Lord Krishna, spent all his time thinking up devious plans to kill his nephew. One day he called upon the demon Bakasura to carry out the evil deed. Bakasura decided to take the form of a huge bird to frighten the young Krishna. Krishna was playing in the forest with his friends when he saw the giant bird swooping towards them. Understanding immediately that this was a demon sent by Kansa to kill him, he seized the bird's beak and leapt inside its mouth! He struggled for some time until the bird's beak broke and the demon Bakasura was vanquished.

IV) Kaliyadaman: This dance tells the story of Lord Krishna's triumph over Kaliya, the poisonous serpent. Early one morning, the cowherds of Gokula were strolling through the woods to reach the riverbank known as Kaliya. The thirsty cowherds and their cattle drank the river water. Suddenly overwhelmed with a sensation of dizziness, they realised that they were dying of deadly poison from the river water. At this moment, Lord Krishna arrived. With a life-giving look, he restored them to health, and set off to fight the demon Kaliya. This time, however, though he danced on the serpent's hood, he did not kill him. Once subdued, the wicked creature bowed its heads and begged for forgiveness. Lord Krishna pardoned him and sent him to Ramanaka Dwipa on the back of Garuda, with the assurance that he will not be harmed now he bears the mark of the Lord's feet on his hood.

3.1 'Caturvimsati Avatara' oja pāli-style performance (19:54 – 30:14)¹

Instrumental introduction

The electronic *tanpura* provides a long drone on Sa. From 19:54, Dipendra plays an extempore melody exploring Rag Mahur on the violin.²

¹ The 'Caturvimsati Avatara' is a poem from the *Kirtana Ghosha*, a collection of Sankaradeva's writings (as well as two poems by other authors) compiled by Sankaradeva's principal disciple Madhadeva. I have used Chandrakanta Mahanta's transcription and English-language translation (C Mahanta 1990).

² Rag Mahur is specifically associated with music from the *sattra* traditions. It is used for 'Sakala Nigama Teri-e', a *borgeet* sung in Mādhadeva's play 'Rās-Jhumurā Nāt', and 'Dekhomāi āvata nanda' a *borgeet* by Mādhadeva.



Melody 4

Entrance

The *tanpura* remains, the violin ceases (20:24) and the *pāli* (chorus) enter slowly from the back-left stage entrance, stepping rhythmically and playing Rhythm 1, Phrase 1 on *khuti-tāl* (small cymbals). Govinda leads, followed by Dinanath, Nitul, Jadumani, and Noren. At 20:24, Govinda, having reached the far right of the stage, moves towards the left and leads the *pāli* into a circular formation which they maintain throughout Phrase 1, fanning out into a crescent shape facing the audience by 21:16.



Rhythm 1

In this crescent position, from 21:16, the *pāli* strike the *khuti-tāl* to Phrase 2 in front of the chest whilst making a step-ball-change to the right and then make a large arc above the head with the arms as the left leg crosses behind the right. From 21:19, this sequence is repeated, but starting on the left leg and moving towards stage left. From 21:22, the dancers then step onto the right foot to face the front right corner of the stage,

and then the left foot to face the front left corner, then right to right corner again, and then they make a 180° counter-clockwise turn to face the back at 21:26. They then perform the same sequence (as from 21:16) facing the back of the stage.

At 21:37, the *pāli* play Phrase 3, Rhythm 1 on *khuti tāl* whilst facing the audience. Each strike of the *khuti tāl* is performed in a different place: the first four slow beats of this phrase are played first, above the head, then behind the back, next to the right of the body, then to the left. For the quick following beats (from 21:39) the dancers perform the same sequence of step-ball-change-cross footwork as in Phrase 2, playing the *khuti-tāl* at chest height. From 21:43, the sequence is repeated in the opposite direction.

At 21:46, the *pāli* play Phrase 4, Rhythm 1, striking the *khuti-tāl* twice towards the front, left, back and right of the stage. At 21:52, the violin begins a short improvised melody as the dancers complete Phrase 4 by stepping the right foot forward and playing one beat towards the front left corner of the stage, then the same but with the left foot and playing the next beat towards the front right. The following two beats are played in the same way, but this time starting on the right. The last three beats are played whilst making a counter-clockwise turn pivoting on the left foot and holding the right foot up, and then returning to the final position facing the audience at 22:00 shown in Figure 54



Figure 54: End of *pāli*'s opening sequence

Caron

At 22:06, the *pāli* start to sing a *cāron* (the unmetered exploration of a *rāga*) in Rag Mahur, using only the sounds ‘*arre ni ri ni ri ri ri ri ra na na*’ accompanied by the violin.³

At 22:31, the *pāli* then sing rhythmic syllables (‘*bajana*’) ‘*tati ni, tati ni, tati nati nati ni*’ three times, whilst stepping in time to the left and the right. On the second iteration, the *oja* (narrator), Niranjan, enters from the stage door at the back right of the stage (22:38). He sings along with the others as he dances behind and then through the group of *pāli* using a sequence of movements that Bhabananda says is ‘used in *oja pāli*’ but does not specify in precisely what context.⁴ The *oja* takes up his position at the centre front of the stage (22:53). At 22:53, the *pāli* sing ‘*dhina tata tata thuna na oo romoni/ gojo gamini jogo mohani awori*’, continuing with the same simple step and regular rhythmic beat of the *khuti-tāl*. The *ojā* joins in in the second line, from ‘*gojo...*’. While the direction of the *oja*’s movements and his footwork now become coordinated with those of the *pāli*, he makes gestures (some mimetic, others non-mimetic) with his arms and hands while they continue to play the *khuti-tāl*. For example, at 23:05, he makes a gesture like an elephant’s trunk (see Figure 55), and at 23:08, he traces two arcs in the air with his hands which indicate a beautiful figure. These words and gestures constitute a short *raga malita*.⁵ According to Bhabananda, ‘*romoni*’ means ‘woman’ (in Assamese). ‘This *rago*,’ he explains, is like a beautiful woman, who walks like elephant.⁶ That’s the beauty of the *raga*.’⁷

At 23:12, the *pāli* stop dancing or singing as the *oja* sings ‘*tata nata nata thei thei tata nata thei*’ whilst miming as if he is playing the *khol* drum. This line is then repeated by the *pāli* at 23:19 as they make one slow and one faster counter-clockwise turn whilst singing and playing *khuti-tāl*, and the *oja* remains still, holding the ‘*khol*-playing’ position. At 23:26, the *oja* repeats the line one more time – the *pāli* still and he miming drumming and then at 23:32, they all dance together, all singing ‘*dhogi titaniti tani*

³ According to Bhabananda, a *raga* is generally sung in three parts: *malita*, *cāron* and *rago* ‘the first part is the *malita*. Next part is the *cāron*—means they celebrate the *raag*—like ‘*ta dhing dhing*’—they mix some tune with words and some sound—and they celebrate. *Rago* is the main body.’ (Paris interview 2017). I describe how *Vrindavani Paal* differs from traditional *oja pāli* on page 212.

⁴ Paris interview 2017.

⁵ The *malita* is described by Maheswar Neog as ‘a lyrical description of a melody [*rāga*], which describes its mood and personality’. Neog further writes that the *malita* may personify the *raga* or ‘connect them with some incident in the life of Kṛṣṇa or of some deity instead.’ Neog 1965: 286.

⁶ a gait which in traditional Indian culture is regarded as highly attractive.

⁷ Paris interview 2017.

theiya theiya oo’ twice, followed by ‘*romoni gojo gamini jogo mohani awori*’. Again, at 23:45, the *oja* makes the ‘elephant’ gesture (Figure 55)

At 23:53, everyone stops dancing, and the *pāli* take the position as in Figure 54. The *oja* sings ‘*e hi*’, then the *pāli* join in (24:00) and they all sing ‘*hey ramo*’.



Figure 55: The *oja* (Niranjan) depicts an elephant (the fingers signify ears and a trunk), which is likened to the raga.

Ghosha (sung couplet)

At 24:09, the *oja* sings in Rag Arhana:

*o ki korilo ki korilo bhakati nakori*⁸

What are we doing, if we’re not doing *bhakti*?⁹

⁸ This is the *ghosha*—the couplet—at the start of ‘Sahasra Nama Vrttanta’, a *khanda* written by Brahman devotee of Sankaradeva Ratnakara Kandali (alias Kaviśekhara, according to Neog 1965: 167), which is one of only two works included in the *Kirtan Ghosha* which are not by Sankaradeva (See Neog 1965: 167, fn 37; 111)

⁹ Translation by Bhabananda Barbayan

The *pāli* responds, at 24:25:

ontake paleko prabhu rayka kora hari

o ki korilo ki korilo bhakati nakori

The time has coming for dying: please protect us Lord, Bless us then we can do *bhakti* to you. What are we doing, if we're not doing *bhakti*?¹⁰

Verse 1

prathame praṇāmo brahmarūpa sanātana

Sarvva avātara kārana nārāyaṇa

[Tayu nābhi-kamalata brahmā bhailā jāta

Yuge yuge avatāra dharā asaṁkhyāta]

First do I bow unto Thee, O Sanatana Narayana

Thou art Brahma manifest, the cause of all incarnations

[From thy Lotus-naval Brahma sprang forth

Innumerable Incarnations through ages Thou hadst]¹¹

From 24:50 The *oja* sings and speaks in *kothon* (Assamese, roughly 'recitative') these lines from the 'Caturvimsati Avatara': *prathame praṇāmo brahmarūpa sanātana*

At 25:03, both *oja* and *pāli* all sing *hey namo* together.

At 25:08 all sing *sarvva avātara kārana nārāyaṇa*

¹⁰ Translation by Bhabananda Barbayan

¹¹ All transcriptions and translations for this poem are from C Mahanta 1990: 3-8. Only the first two lines of Verse 1 are sung and interpreted in *Vrindavani Paal*.



Figure 56: 'First do I bow unto Thee, O Sanatana Narayana'

Verse 2

matsyarūpe avatāra bhailā prathamata

uddhārilā veda prabhu pralaya jalata

[satyavrata rājāka dekhāilā nija māyā

nadharilā samudre tohmāra matsyakāyā]

O Lord, Thou hadst incarnated first as Fish,

Rescueth the Vedas from the dire deluge;

[Showeth King Satyavrata Thine māyā own;

Thy Fish Form the Ocean could never contain.]

At 25:19, the *oja* says he will speak about Matsya, the fish incarnation of Vishnu, and makes the *matsya hasta*. At 25:26, the *pāli* say '*jano bap kahio*' – 'tell us more', and the *oja* repeats the words '*e matsyarūpe*' three whilst leaping in a counter-clockwise turn with his hands in a *hasta* which represents Matsya (see Figure 58). He faces the audience and says '*avatāra*' whilst making two broad arcs with arms out-stretched and hands in *sasaka hasta* (as Figure 57). *bhailā prathamata*' and then repeats '*bhailā prathamata*'

He then repeats ‘*uddhārilā*’ twice and then says ‘*care veda pralaya jalata.*’ This differs from the textual version in the omission of the word ‘*prabhu*’ in the live version and the insertion of the word ‘*care*’ (Assamese, ‘four’) at 25:46 which he says whilst showing four fingers to the audience to emphasise the meaning.

At 25:41, the *pāli* then repeat the line *uddhārilā care veda pralaya jalata* whilst playing the *khuti-tāl* to the left and to the right, as the *oja* makes a full slow counter-clockwise turn on the right leg with left foot lefted behind and hands in *matsya hasta*.



Figure 57: Position taken each time oja utters ‘*avatara*’



Figure 58: ‘*Thou hadst incarnated first as Fish*’

Verse 3

kūrma avatāra bhailā ksīrodadhi tīre

lakṣa praharara pantha judilā śarīre

[karileka pari stuti surāsura nāge

dharilā mandara giri prabhu prsthabhāge]

Thou hadst incarnated as Tortoise on Milk Ocean shore;

Thine Body covered a space of a lac prahara

[Gods, demons, serpents prostrated and prayed;

Thou hadst placed Mr. Mandara upon Thy back]

From 26:02, the *oja* makes a half plié and holds his hands in *kurma hasta* - the hand position representing Kurma – the tortoise incarnation of Lord Vishnu (Figure 59) as he sings ‘*arre kūrma*’. Then he says (in *kothon* - stylised speech) ‘*avatāra bhailā*’ whilst taking the avatar-of-Vishnu position (Figure 57). He then sings ‘*ksīrodadhi tīre*’ whilst making a long smooth gesture from right to left, depicting the ocean (from 26:10). At 26:17, the *oja* and *pāli* sing together: ‘*laksa praharara pantha judilā śarīre*’.



Figure 59: 'Thou hadst incarnated as Tortoise'

Verse 4

Divya yajna varāha svarūpa bhailā tumi

Līlāye dantara agre uddārila bhūmi

Tohmāka karilā yuddha hiranyākṣa vīrī

Aprayāse daityaka mārila dante chidi

As divine Yajña-Varāha thou hadst appeareth;

Sportingly with Thine tip of teeth hadst the earth lifted.

With the hero Hiranyākṣa did have a fight:

Effortlessly Thou killeth him, tearing with Thy teeth

At 26:28, the *oja* speaks a few words to tell the audience that he will now talk about *varaha* and what he did to the demon Hiranyakṣa. Just as at 25:26, the *pāli* respond at 26:36 with ‘*jano bap kahio*’ – ‘tell us more’. He then recites, in *kothon* a variation on line 1 above (from 26:38): ‘*he divya, hey joikya, arkani varāha, svarūpa bhailā tumi/ Tako korile*’. From 26:48 he recites line 2: *e līlāye, e līlāye, dantara agre uddārila bhūmi*, whilst moving to the right of the stage with his hands held like the tusks of Varaha, and lifting the earth into the air (26:54). At 26:55, the *pāli* repeat *līlāye dantara agre uddārila bhūmi*, but they sing, rather than recite the line.

At 27:07, the *oja* speaks a few more words which expand upon and create tension leading up to the second two lines of Verse 4. At 27:14, the *oja* repeat ‘*jano bap kahio*’ – ‘tell us more’, and at 27:17 the *oja* says: ‘*e tohmāka, e tohmāka, akre koriseluto, akre koriseluto, hiranyākṣa vīrī*’. At 27:28 the *pāli* repeat ‘*hiranyākṣa vīrī*’, then the *oja* says it again, and then the *pāli* repeat the phrase again.

At 27:36, the *oja* says ‘*thaki korile*’ (‘then what happened...’) and then a variation of the fourth line of Verse 4: ‘*e aprayāse, e aprayāse, beta daityaka bodila dante chidi*’.

At 27:45, the *pāli* then sing the last two lines of the song again, to a new melody – at a faster pace than the rest of the song.



Figure 60: 'As divine Yajña-Varāha thou hadst appeareth'

Verse 5

ādi daitya hiranyakasipu balīyāra

narasimha rūpe hiyā vidārilā tāra

karilā nirbhaya pāilā tridaśe ullāsa

bhakta prahlādaka prabhu karilā āśvāsa

Thou hadst incarnated as Narasimha on earth;

Tearst the chest of Hiranakaśipu, first demon in might.

Thine deed pleased gods, that got freedom from fear;

Thou hadst appeased Prahlāda, Thy devotee so dear.

At 27:58 the *oja* then speaks and acts out an improvised dramatic episode about the killing of Hiranakaśipu (represented in the dramatic posture shown in Figure 61; 28:15).¹² Up to 28:15, the *pāli* play the *khuti-tal* whilst stepping towards and facing the right and the left alternately. At the dramatic moment at 28:15, the *pāli* stop their playing and choral chanting, and the *oja* says *hiyā vidārilā* unaccompanied, whilst dramatically interpreting the gruesome actions he describes. At 28:21, the *oja* freezes

¹² This section (27:58 – 28:21) – not part of the text of the 'Caturvimsati Avatara' – was taught to Niranjan as a 'traditional' interpretation of the poem by Bhabananda some years earlier, and was taught to Bhabananda by his guru.

and then, as the *pāli* sing ‘*e Narasimha rūpe hiyā vidārilā tāra*’, he dances in a counter-clockwise circle.

At 28:27 he sings a short narratorial section which is not in the main text, which reminds the audience of the importance of speaking of the divine and elaborates on the story. He takes meaningful gestures such as at 28:32, representing *Narasimha* – half man; half lion, as Figure 63) The *pāli* join in at 28:37 and then at 28:46 they all sing together ‘*ontake paleko prabhu rayka kora hari / o ki korilo bhakati nakori*’ (The time has coming for dying: please protect us Lord, Bless us then we can do bhakti to you. What are we doing, if we’re not doing *bhakti*?) as they did in 3. (24:25). The *oja* dances and performs a combination of meaningful and non-mimetic hand positions.



Figure 61: *Hiranakaśipu*

Verse 7

bhailāha paraśurāma name avatāra

pradaksina kari bhūmi tini sātavāra

ksatriyaka kālītā paraśu kare dhari

niksatriya karilā samasta vasundharī

Thou didst appear as Paraśrāma in Incarnation;

Move around the world three times into seven.

Thou didst cut to pieces Ksatriyas with Thy axe in hand

Annihilate them all from surface of the world.

The *pāli* remain completely still and quiet as, at 29:00 the *oja* says ‘*bhailāha paraśurāma*’, whilst stamping his feet quickly and percussively and making an axe shape with his right arm. He then takes the ‘avatar’ position (Figure 57) as he utters ‘*name avatāra*’. At 29:06, he then says ‘*pradaksina kari bhūmi tini sātavāra*’. As he says *tini* (Assamese: ‘three’) he holds up three fingers and at ‘*sātavāra*’ (‘seven’) he holds up seven fingers.

A slight variation on the last two lines of the verse are then performed by both *oja* and *pāli* from 29:16 – 29:30. The *oja* says ‘*e ksatriyaka*’, all say ‘*e kahila, e kahila, e kahila*’ as the *oja* slices the air with his hand dramatically, to the right, to the left, and to the right again, as the *pāli* emphasise the action by matching the direction of their movements to the *oja* and playing the *khuti tal* on the second syllable of each utterance of *kahili*. The *pāli* then freeze (29:21) as the *oja* says ‘*paraśu kare dhari, niksatriya karilā samasta vasundharī*’.



Figure 62: Thou didst cut to pieces Ksatriyas with Thy axe in hand

Verse 9

chirirama rupe kauśalyāta avatari

vanavāsa khapilā pitrra vākya dhari

virādha kabandha mārīcara lailā prāna

khara dūsanaka prabhu karilā niryyāna

Thou hadst incarnated as Chiri-Rāma from Kauśalyā;

Exiled Thyself in the forest, keeping father's words.

Thou hadst killed Virādha, Kabandha and Mārica;

Hadst also killed the demons Khara and Dūsana

At 29:31, *oja* and *pāli* all sing '*chirirama rupe kauśalyāta avatari/ vanavāsa khapilā pitrra vākya dhari*' The *oja* move from left to right, keeping time with the *kuthi-tal* and placing one heel on the ground, as the *oja* continues to dance making meaningful *hastas* with his hands (for example Figure 63 at 29:35 and Figure 57 at 29:40).



Figure 63: 'Thou hadst incarnated as Narasimha'

Ghosha (repeat)

At 29:54, the *pāli* start to exit, using both stage doors or taking their seats on the white sheet and taking up their instruments, everyone sings '*ontake paleko prabhu rayka kora hari /ki korilo ki korilo bhakati nakori*' (as 0 at 24:09 and 0 at 28:46)

By the second 'ki korilo' the *oja* is left alone, singing solo centre stage (30:08). He sings the last words with a gradual *rallentando* as he makes a *namaskar* gesture to the audience (30:14).

3.2 Bakasura - *bhaona*-style performance (30:17 – 34:42)

3.2.1 (30:17) The *oja* introduces the story of Krishna killing the snake-demon Bakasura in recitative. At 30:35 the *oja* and the seated musicians repeat ‘*hari bola, hari bola, hari bola*’.

3.2.2 (30:42) Niranjana then dances a short solo to the violin, which ends with him stretching his hands out towards stage left in a gesture which announces the arrival of the next dancers onto the stage. According to Bhabananda, at this point, the ‘*oja* has become *sutradhar*’.¹³

3.2.3 (30:52) Bhabananda enters as the *oja* exits stage right, shortly followed by Mukunda (31:09) now changed into ‘male’ costume) from stage left. They are both holding their hands in the *sasaka hasta* as if holding a flute (as in Figure 48 and Figure 39). Bhabananda is playing Krishna and Mukunda is Balabadhra (aka Boloram), Krishna’s older brother. The two brothers are carefree and enjoying life in the rural setting of Vrindavan, where they work as cowherds.

The dance is accompanied by vocals, violin, *khol* and *tāl*. The melody is from a *pravesha geet* (‘entry song’), a song genre sung in *bhaona* performances on the arrival of Krishna on stage, but with new lyrics, written especially for the performance by Bhabananda, because there is no traditional song about Bakasura in the *ankiya geet* repertoire (the songs sung in *Ankiya Bhaona*). It is in Rag Sindhura, *ek tāl*.¹⁴ Between the three verses there are short instrumental sections at 31:29 – 31:39 and 32:09 – 32:18, where the dancers continue to dance, and the violin takes the main melody. The dance itself uses re-ordered components of a *pravesha nach* (Assamese: ‘entry dance’).¹⁵ At 32:32, both dancers exit stage left.

¹³ Paris interview 2017. The *sutradhar*, is the on-stage narrator-cum-stage director in *bhaona*. It is also the word used to describe a narrator figure in Sanskrit dramaturgy, who performs a similar role (for a description of the *Sutradhar*’s role in a production of *bhaona*, see P Neog 2008: 182- 205. For clarity, I will continue to refer to Niranjana as ‘the *oja*’, though his role becomes more like that of the *sutradhar* here.

¹⁴ Details of this song given by Bhabananda. Personal communication, 1st November, 2018.

¹⁵ According to Sunil Kothari ‘In traditional Ankiya Nat performances, the actors make their appearance in *Pravesha Nritya* with different gaits for each type of role, and accompanied by their distinctive *Pravesha Geet*’ (Kothari 2013: 90). I explain how the dance here differs from a conventional *pravesha nach* in Chapter Five, p. 215.

3.2.3 (32:32) Bakasura enters. Basanta, dressed in a full-body bird costume with white feathers and a yellow beak dances a demonic dance across the stage to the violin and *bhortal* (There are no vocals until after the fight has ended)

3.2.4 (33:18) Krishna (Bhabananda) enters stage right. He dances a Krishna dance next to Bakasura. They notice each other (33:35) and Krishna retreats a little. They behold each other from opposite side of the stage. Then they dance towards each other centre stage and enact a danced ‘fight’.

3.2.5 At 34:23, Krishna seizes Bakasura by the beak and subdues him. They exit stage left (34:40) as Niranjan dances on stage right and takes up the *purush ora* position.



Figure 64: Krishna kills Bakasura

3.3 *Kaliya Daman* (34:42 – 44:40)

3.3.1 (34:42) Niranjan addresses the audience in recitative about what will happen next—he performs a gesture denoting the serpent demon Kaliya (as Figure 65; 34:50). His address ends with three repetitions of ‘Hari Bola’ (from 35:01) and then he takes up the *purush ora* position (35:08).



Figure 65: The oja introduces the serpent demon Kaliya

3.3.2 From 35:08, the *oja* dances a short segment of *sutradhari nach*, and then repeats a gesture of announcement towards the door on stage right (35:21) as Jadumani and Dinanath appear wearing papier maché head pieces made by Hemchandra Goswami (from Chamaguri Sattrā¹⁶) with five snake heads on each. According to Bhabananda, the number ten was used as each snake represents one hundred heads of the thousand-headed snake demon Kaliya.

3.3.3 From 35:28, the demons dance with hands in a ‘serpent’ gesture. Boloram starts to sing, in Asowari Rāg, *puri tāl*, the third song of *Kaliya Daman*, a play by Sankaradeva. Lyrics extracted from this same song are stitched, in Assamese lettering, on the British Museum’s Vrindavani Vastra textile (Figure 66).¹⁷

¹⁶ A householder *sattrā* on Majuli Island. The masks in the British Museum exhibition were also made in Chamaguri Sattrā.

¹⁷ Details of this song given by Bhabananda. Personal communication, 1st November, 2018.



Figure 66: Lyrics from a song in *Kaliya Daman*, a play by Sankaradeva, stitched into the British Museum *Vrindavani Vastras*. Image reproduced from Blurton 2016.

The dance performed by the demons, is a new composition: ‘everything is composition. These steps are completely new: you don’t have that kind of thing [usually in traditional *oja-pālis*]’ (Paris interview 2017).

From 36:01 – 36:17, the singing pauses, and the *Kaliya Daman* dancers perform to instrumental music, the melody played by the violin. At 36:17, the song resumes until the dancers exit at 36:30.



Figure 67: Jadumani and Dinnanath as Kaliya the snake demon

3.3.4 (36:30) Bhabananda and Mukunda enter, dancing to instrumental music and an eight-beat *tāl* cycle. They are acting as Krishna's friends, the male cowherds, who dance in the 'Krishna' style (hands held in the *sasaka hasta* as Figure 48) at the centre of the stage until 36:54.

3.3.5 (36:54) The dance turns to mime, and the music continues. The cowherds feel tired and thirsty after all the playing (36:59). They are delighted to come across the river (37:12) and drink from it thirstily (37:17). Discovering that the water is poisoned, they grasp at their own throats and the rhythm of the music changes to a seven beat cycle (37:29). They whirl around and collapse on the ground and all the percussion stops (37:42).

3.3.6 Meanwhile, Naren has entered (37:36), playing Krishna. The music resumes, back to the eight-beat cycle. Naren dance-acts as if rounding up his cows, playing the flute and looking out for his friends. With some distress, he notices his friends lying unconscious on the riverbank (38:15). At this point the percussion stops, and the singer sings verses from Sankaradeva's *Dasam Skandha Bhagawata*,¹⁸ without rhythm, and accompanied only by a plaintive melody on the violin. He tries disconsolately to rouse them (38:23). He stands and then does the 'serpent' gesture to show he has realised that this is the work of the serpent God Kaliya (38:42). He recaps for the audience what must have happened – miming drinking from the water (38:45) repeating the serpent hand position (38:54) and then gesturing towards his fallen friends (38:59). He caresses them both lovingly, one after the other (39:08; 39:17). Slowly, Krishna draws his friends back to life (39:25). Initially drowsy and confused, they turn to see who has saved them (39:39). Naren, centre stage, takes the iconic 'flute-playing' Krishna pose with both hands in *sasaka hasta* and the others slowly rise before him, their hands held in a *namaskar* symbolising respect and gratitude. (39:44)

3.3.7 At 39:46, Krishna dances joyfully towards the front of the stage with hands in *sasaka hasta* and kneels (39:50), as his two friends move back towards stage right, standing with hands in *namshkar* position.

¹⁸ Sankaradeva's popular Assamese rendering of the first half of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, which describes episodes from the early part of Krishna's life. These verses describe the moment Krishna discovers his friends poisoned by the serpent demon Kaliya. Information about this song given by Bhabananda Barbayan, personal correspondence, November 1st 2018.

3.3.8 At 39:50, the demons enter from stage left. Krishna's friends exit stage right as Krishna swims over to the demons and faces them. They circle each other for a moment, and then pause facing one another (40:15). Krishna and the demons 'fight' until Krishna stands in between the two kneeling demons, with his hands in *sasaka hasta* and right foot raised (40:43), representing the moment when Krishna stands up on the hood of the demon.



Figure 68: Krishna stands on the hood of the serpent demon Kaliya

3.3.9 (40:45) Krishna 'dances on the hood' of the demons until they slump down, heads bowed in surrender and he resumes his position with foot raised.

3.3.10 'Ki korilo' is sung slowly, extempore as Krishna invites the vanquished demons to rise. They bow their heads and do a respectful *namaskar*. He gives a gesture which seems to signify their release, or his forgiveness.

3.4 Kharmanar Nach (41.41 – 44:43)

Krishna and the snake demons joyfully start to dance together and the rest of the troupe enter the stage. Everyone stands in Purush Ora stance before starting a group dance called a *kharmanar nach*, in *tāla kharmān*. Bhabananda explains:

This dance was originally performed as a finale in *ankiya bhaona* performances. In this performance all characters dance the finale together, but in the *sattrā*, only the hero and heroine (Krishna or Ram, Sita or Rukmini) and their friends dance. But

if there's another character, then they don't. In the sattra. But personally, when I do in the outside, in the stage, then I follow this rule.¹⁹

The first 2.5 minutes of the dance are done in a line facing the audience. This then morphs into a circle, centre-facing formation for 20 seconds (which, according to Bhaba is 'not traditional' but an 'improvisation' on the traditional model)

Exit full company dancing, to violin (44:43).

Item 4: *Bhortal Nritya* (44:45 – 50:48)

4.1 – Rhythmic introduction

At 44:58 the musicians start clapping a rhythm and then play a fast *nagara* solo. The audience claps along with the beat.

4.2 – Borgeet 1

At 45:35, all the instruments stop and then restart a very slow pulse as Boloram commences a *borgeet*, a devotional song by Sankaradeva sung to a tune composed by Narahari Burhabhokat 'the principal composer of *bhortal* dance from Barpeta Satra'.²⁰ The four dancers (Bhabananda, Mukunda, Niranjan and Noren) enter slowly from stage right, holding a *bhortal* (large cymbal) in each hand. They gradually form a circle, moving the *bhortal* above their head as they move. Then they form a line facing the front, slowly rotating the *bhortal* upwards and downwards. From 46:57, they spin the *bhortal* quickly as the musicians clap and sing. The only percussion is the *nagara*. From 47:45, they hold the *bhortal* still in their hands and make slower upwards and downward movements. At 48:06, they form a centre-facing group, miming as if to clash the *bhortal* against the *bhortal* held by the other dancers. The dance continues in a square formation and then, at 48:41, the performers dance towards the audience.

4.3 – Percussion only

At 49:14, there is a momentary pause in the dance and the song comes to a close, and all hold the *bhortal* together, one on top of the other, facing the front for four pulses. At

¹⁹ Paris interview 2017.

²⁰ Bhabananda Barbayan, personal correspondence, 1st November 2018.

49:16, the rhythm that was used at 4.1 resumes on *nagara*, clapping and *bhortal* and the dance gets faster.

4.4 – *loyo hari naam* (Marked as ‘Borgeet 2’ in video)

At 49.43, with no break in the dance routine, Boloram starts to sing ‘*loyo hari naam ehe loyohe bhaihe/ manobi jonon biphole jaihe*,’ an anonymous refrain in Assamese, according to Bhabananda, not taken from any known religious text.²¹ Boloram repeats the same words over the same rhythmic accompaniment as 4.1 and 4.3. The dancers kneel in a square formation facing each other and dance kneeling, only moving the upper body and arms.

At 50.41, the singing stops, and the dancing continues for a short while to percussion only.

Item 5: *Gayan Bayan* (50:53 – 1:00:04)

5.1 - Transition

From 51:00 – 51:17, Boloram sings the same refrain as in 4.4, but this time slowly, and without meter, as the dancers remain completely still in a half plié, holding the *bhortal* one on top of the other, and at 51:09, three more performers enter stage (Govinda, Jadumani and Dinanath) carrying *khuti-tal*. They form a straight line parallel with the audience at the back of the stage – they represent the *gayan* – the singing party. All the artists who were part of the *bhortal nrityo* exchange their pair of *bhortals* for one of the *khol* which have been placed at the front of the stage throughout the performance (51:13). These *khol*-players are the *bayan* – the drumming, dancing party.

5.2 – *Bahā-cāhini*:

At 51:27, the singing ceases, and the five ‘*bayan*’ half kneeling, half crouching, play a seven-beat matra in a line at the front of the stage. The three *gayan* dance on the spot

²¹ Personal correspondence, November 1st 2018.

and playing the *khuti-tal*; At various points, (eg. 51:41 and 51:56) the *bayan* pause their playing and moving whilst the *gayan* continue for two bars. Any time one or both hands are ‘at rest’, they are held in coordinated stylised gestures. There is only the sound of the *khuti-tal* and *khol*.

5.3 – *Na dhemali/ram dhemali*

At 53:27, the *bayan* rise to their feet, still in a straight line. There is brief applause and then second section starts 53:29. As soon as they start to play the two *bayan* at the ends of the line (Jadumani and Naren) step behind, creating a second row behind, and visible between, the remaining three players. They perform coordinated footwork and counter-clockwise turns as they play on the *khol*. At 53:44, the *bayan* stop drumming and make a series of four hand movements twice: lotus to the right with both hands, lotus to the left with both hands, *mojura hasta*, then *namaskar* gesture. At 53:54, they turn 90° to face the left side and then perform a 270° counter-clockwise leaping turn to face towards the front again. Then they continue to perform coordinated footwork and turns as they play on the *khol*. At 54:24, they stop playing again and make coordinated hand gestures. At 54:34, they make two leaping spins towards the left, and then, at 54:41, two towards the right. They resume playing the *khol* accompanied with coordinated footwork and counter-clockwise turns. At 55:35, the *bayan* change formation, and dance in a counter-clockwise circle, still in front of the *gayan*, until 55:53 when they resume a forward-facing formation. They maintain this formation until 56:45, when Bhabananda kneels at the centre and the others arrange themselves around him. At 56:58, they balance their *kholes* end on (two bass facing up, two treble facing up) and then Bhabananda plays all five drums (see Figure 69) accompanied only by the *gayan*. The other *bayan* support the drum and wait kneeling, with hands in *purush ora* until 57:47 when they rise up and join in again in two lines, with Bhabananda still kneeling.



Figure 69: *Gayan Bayan*

The standing *bayan* then start to circle around him, first playing and dancing and then, at 57:53, doing quick leap-turns. They stop at 57:58 and are briefly back in two lines again, with Bhabanda playing, kneeling in the centre, before Bhabanda jumps up to join them (58:01) and all the *bayan* begin to circle in a counter-clockwise direction as the outer two players circle in front of the bayan in opposite directions, crossing over at the front of the stage (58:08) and continuing back to their original places (58:18). The *bayan* continue to move in a circle, and then resume the front-facing formation at 58:22. They perform in this formation until 58:42, when they start to dance in a slow counter-clockwise direction again. At 58:51, they dance clockwise, and then back to counter-clockwise at 58:58. At 59:14, Bhabananda eases out of the circle and starts to lead the drummers in a winding procession which makes a figure of eight, files behind the *gayan* (59:33) and then snakes around the stage until 59:55, when all the *bayan* kneel in two rows facing the audience, still playing.

In this final section, between rhythmic sequences, the *bayan* strike identical positions whilst the *gayan* continue to play. For example, they make a slow *namaskar* towards the front at 01:00:23, and again towards the front right corner of the stage at 01:00:31 (Figure 70), and at 01:01:08, they cross and cup their hands above their head towards the front right corner of the stage (Figure 71). Then at 01:01:16 they repeat the same posture towards the front of the stage.



Figure 70: Namaskar position during gayan bayan



Figure 71: Position at 01:01:08 during gayan bayan

The *bayan*, still kneeling, then repeat a short sequence three times to the front, to the left, to the right and then once again to the front (01:01:16 – 01:01:36). At 01:02:40, the *bayan* stop playing, and kneel still, their left hand stretched across their body towards the right, with palm facing outward. The violin strikes up, and plays a solo and the

audience starts to applaud (01:02:44). *Bayan* and *gayan* take a long slow bow with hands in *namaskar* position (01:02:50)

At 01:02:56, Boloram starts to sing a lively song as the *bayan* leap to their feet and start to move in a large anti-clockwise circle, joined by the *gayan*. Nirranjan leads the whole party off the stage via the left stage exit (01:03:04). The song stops once the last *gayan* has exited the stage (01:03:31). The audience applauds, and at 01:03:35, the whole *gayan bayan* troupe re-emerges from the right stage exit, now without their instruments and with hands held in *namaskar* gesture. They make their way in a counter-clockwise direction around the perimeter of the stage, and the musicians rise and join the back of the line. At 01:04:02, they are in a long line facing the audience. They bow once, hands still in *namaskar* position (01:04:03) and then continue to file off the stage, led by Basanta, in an anti-clockwise direction via the left exit.

After the performance

After the performance, the *bhakats* came out into the front of stage, spoke to audience members and gave short interviews to the film crew. The audience thinned slowly—many people remained to chat, discuss what they had seen and to congratulate the performers and organisers. The performers went downstairs to the ‘greenroom’ to remove their makeup and drink water, before we had to vacate the British Museum for closing.

